

Episode 238 - Samantha Fletcher: Lessons Learned from Lifelong Social Activists: Overcoming Barriers to Activism

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from the 716 early May around here is an exciting time for bird lovers, that eccentric, exceedingly friendly, and early rising fellowship of which I can say I'm a member. The spring migration of warblers and all the other returning species is something that we all look forward to all year. So nature preserve, Dunkirk harbor, Forest Lawn, Lakeside Cemetery. HERE WE COME. I'm Peter Sobota. Most activists know or eventually learn that social change activity is glacial in its pace and not for the easily diverted. In this episode our guest Samantha Fletcher shares what she learned in interviewing and studying the work of lifelong social activists. She discovered how these folks navigated the life of social activism what sustain them and how they responded to the inevitable setbacks and barriers. Ms Fletcher recounts the strategies utilized by these committed change agents and which they felt were the most effective. Lots of wisdom here. Samantha Fletcher MSW is a Ph.D. candidate and the assistant dean of academic programs in the School of Social Welfare at the State University of New York at Albany. Ms Fletcher was interviewed by a pretty formidable activist herself. Our own Dr. Diane Elze associate professor and director of the MSW program here at the UB School of Social Work. they spoke in March of 2018.

[00:02:07] Hello my name is Diane Elze and I'm an associate professor and director of the MSW program at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. I am talking today with Samantha Fletcher about the research she has conducted with lifelong social activists. Sam is a Ph.D. candidate at the University at Albany's School of Social Welfare where she is the interim assistant dean of academic programs. Sam thanks so much for your willingness to be interviewed today. Tell us about your current research.

[00:02:37] The project that I based my dissertation on. I actually started in 2013 when I was an MSW student and essentially I ended up interviewing older adults who identified as lifelong social activists. I really became interested in this for a couple of reasons. One I was an MSW student and I was sitting in class and I identify as Native American. And in my culture we learned from the elders and that's very common to have mentors as you know elders and they teach you certain skills and everything. And I kept learning a lot of interventions for older adults. I didn't really see a space for older adults to tell their stories. And for us to learn from them so I that was one thing that interested me as a researcher is that I wanted to hear from these older adults who had engaged in activism. And I was interested in activism part because I grew up in the south in a fairly racist sexist heterosexist xenophobic environment. And I have a trans racial family. My children are all black and brown so I see the impact of racism every day and I really wanted on a personal level to gain skills to be able to know how to impact my own environment. And I knew of this group of older adults who had been working in activism for years and I really wanted to learn from them. So that's how my research really started in 2013 and it's really evolved over the last four for about four years. I've been writing it up for about six months six to eight months. So that was the beginning.

[00:04:28] Can you tell us more about the sample that you chose where did you find them. How old were they and what movements were they involved in.

[00:04:42] So my sample I had visited a church that was known as open and affirming which I had never heard of before I moved to New York and that is essentially a church that welcomes people who identify as non heterosexual and non gender binary. And not only are they welcome there. You

know sometimes they're the preacher they hold positions of power so I have visited this church. It was open and affirming. And what really struck me is that the like the mean age of the members of this church were 75. So I was really curious how all these older adults got involved in activism and the fact that they were in a church that was open and affirming. And that's really where I got interested so I did one recruitment strategy I guess I did a an announcement in this church and all my this came from that one announcement that they were all from the church. So there were people in the church who knew of other activists in the community. In fact in my final sample four of them were not associated with this church at all. I ended up with in my final sample. It was nine older adults in 2016 that's when I kind of nailed down the age and everything with them. They were 71 to 96 years old. One identified as African-American and the other identified as Caucasian and they were all involved in multiple social causes. I actually interviewed other older social activists but were only involved in one cause and I really wanted people in multiple causes. Just because as a social worker we're trained to work for social change on multiple issues not just one. So for my own personal benefit and for also for social workers I wanted to see how they managed that. So most of them were involved in the civil rights movement back starting in the 40s and the 50s. Several of them were involved in the women's rights movement including the men I had four women and five men in this study several who were involved in the LGBTQ movement Poverty Initiative. Multiple people worked on different different parts like large scale poverty initiatives. They were also involved in the antiwar movement. Most of them got started with that with Vietnam. But then one of them started with the Gulf War that started in 1990 and then I had three of them who they were really interested in geopolitical subversion which I didn't even know what that was until I started this project. But they went into Latin America. One of them went to Cuba and they really worked with people in those countries and trying to educate people here about what was happening. .

[00:07:32] So a real diversity activist causes.

[00:07:37] Yes. Also they were interested in the environment. What was interesting is their whole lives were dedicated to social change. So whereas a lot of them started in the civil rights movement they would pick up new causes as they went because they were very open to hearing different social problems. I too started with environmental causes in the 1960s. Almost all of them had picked it up by the time I interviewed them because they saw that that was a social problem and something they should get involved in.

[00:08:10] So backing up a moment because I don't think we've really talked about this yet. What were your research questions. What did you hope to find out from these folks.

[00:08:24] OK. So I had two research questions. The first one was how do individuals navigate a lifelong activism journey. And essentially what I wanted to know from that question was how did they stay involved over decades like what made these people different then then maybe someone who just goes to one demonstration. Or you know someone that might have one cause. And how did they keep this up. Their range of activism years was between 40 and 72 years of activism. So I want to know how did you do that for decades. Like what kept you because I knew that they had you know all these barriers they face so what made you different and not quit and to keep fighting for rights that took an incredibly long time to gain any any forward momentum that was really what I was looking for with that first research question and then the second research question was how have older lifelong social activists work toward social change and essentially with that question. I just want to know how did you do it. What did you do. What strategies did you use to create change or work for change. And so then what did you discover. It was inductive and deductive price is a multiple case study so with each participant I had multiple sources of evidence. I did one focus group at the beginning and I didn't end up doing any more because it was a little bit difficult just with a like hearing abilities. Some of them had trouble hearing other people and everything. So I did have the one focus group but then I did individual interviews with each person

too. For most of them and then I also had documentation like newspaper articles. I had some of them kept diaries which was phenomenal. And they wrote about like when they were becoming an activist so I had like that firsthand account I had meeting minutes. I had photographs. They allowed me to take photographs of the props they used. So I had a lot of evidence and looking at all of that evidence across time because you know some of it was from like the 60s I had newspaper articles from the 60s 70s 80s what I found was for the first research question how did individuals navigate a lifelong activism journey that there were really three themes that I broke into that discuss how they're able to do that long term. The first one was conceptualizing social justice. So they all had this conception of what social justice was. Eight of the nine participants defined it as equality of opportunity for people despite membership group or access to basic resources and not being equal across groups. They also described how they developed that sense of social justice. So for some of them it was just their life experiences. So like the women they had. And then for my one participant who was an African-American. They they experience pretty profound oppression. So for them that really went into how they developed their thinking about how things should be or what I called their ideal social world and that sense of social justice really drove how they identified social problems and then critiqued the systems and structures where that oppression lived. I kind of call that their intellectual stage and that was very well developed with all of the activists. The second thing was what motivated them to go from that intellectual stage into actual activism. So for this group of activists their motivating factors. They identified the top three were religion. And it was really that value the value basis that they were taught in their religion like what they believed that if I identify as this then this is what that looks like. That I should be working toward this ideal social order. They also discussed being motivated by social cost leaders and they talked about both local and national. So several of them either saw Martin Luther King Jr. in person or they certainly heard him on the TV and the radio and they talked about how he really set the agenda for the civil rights movement. But it was the local leaders that showed them how to work toward that in their own environment. They also talk about connecting to the social cause. So this was more of an emotional reaction. So for a lot of the activists they were in college during the Vietnam War. They had friends who were drafted. They went to war. And some of them came back and they had PTSD and they weren't doing well. And then some of them died. So they saw the direct effects and it made them angry. So they had this connection and the same thing that with the civil rights movement or the women's movement so those were the things that really got them from thinking about the problem to moving to action. And then the last thing that I looked at with this long term were these factors that helped keep them and sustained them throughout their journey. So one of the key things was relationships they talked about one of my activist said that activism is never done alone. It's always done with a group of like minded people. They talked about their peers a lot and their allies but they also talked about developing relationships with politicians. So several of them worked with the governor of their state or with their legislators and certainly with their local people the mayors that was really key to making change and keeping them on their journey keeping them going forward just those types of support. And they talked about the goals that they had. So several of them had the goal of building bridges across communities. Their social actions would be tied to that goal. They would do things that would work toward bringing people who belong to different memberships together. They also all identified the barriers they faced. I had two of my activists were actually kidnapped at gunpoint. These were two that were in Nicaragua and they used that they talked about that experience. And even though they were terrified when it happened they said it was one of the best things that happened to their activism career because people wanted to hear about the kidnapping. And then they were able to educate them about geopolitical subversion and what was happening in Nicaragua with you know United States government and different corporations. They talked about all of these things are the things that kept them in the activism world for decades. So that was the first question.

[00:15:16] Well you just gave a lot of information. I think one question I may have is you know your sample was small but did you notice any differences between the folks who may have

experienced oppression in their own lives on a daily basis and those who may have not you know if any differences jumped out at you around perhaps motivation.

[00:15:45] So that's really interesting because all four women describe the profound sexism they face. However the one African-American I had was also a woman and she talked much more about racism than she did sexism. The one thing that it did they had a personal experience with oppression and they knew what it felt like. So I think it gave them an empathy towards other groups who were also facing oppression because they had that lived experience of oppression. However in saying that I will say that the white men that I had in the study they purposely hung out with people outside their own membership group. I'll give you an example. Reverend Lamar a white male and he came to Albany in the 1950s. He had graduated from Yale Divinity to be a preacher and a Presbyterian church. And he saw the racism that was happening in Albany at that time and that it was very segregated. And so he went with a team of people from his church into the black community and talked to the matriarchs to identify the social problems. And then he worked with the black activists supporting them. So even though from his own his own words that he has a lot of privilege. He went to the people who didn't have privilege to learn about their experiences and what they would want for him to do and how that he could support them. And that was the case with the other white men as well as that they would put themselves in groups like LGBTQ race different religions. They worked with Muslim community Jewish community really to bridge those gaps. But I would say with the women and specially with my African-American participant they have that lived experience that really gave them that firsthand. This is what it feels like to not have the same opportunities as other people.

[00:17:46] I think I want to just back up a moment. The multiple sources of evidence that you use because that sounds really interesting and I wonder if you can give us a little bit more detail I know that you did focus group and interviews but then you looked at archival documents and and perhaps other sources could you say a little bit more about those multiple sources of evidence how you found them and were those stories about the people who you were interviewing and who are the movements that they were involved in.

[00:18:26] Yes. This research project really evolved over time. So after I started with the focus group and then I did eight individual interviews and not all of the participants ended up in my final sample. But when I did those I saw that it was a lot of what they were telling me even though several of them are still active in activism. But a lot of it was also data from you know 40 years ago. So I thought it would be really important to have as much data as possible from the time when they were really active and really in it. So I went back after I interviewed them I went back and asked them if they could provide me with any evidence that they had. So I had a couple of really good record keepers. One woman had written down everything she had she had letters she had written. So I had just just from her I have probably like 40 pieces of documentation photographs news letters she had written newspaper articles that she had saved a scrapbook of all her activism. So that was just incredibly useful data and it spanned its span like 30 years. And then I had one of the male participants he had kept journals he had the fewest years of activism that 40 years. And he had become an activist in his 40s which was different than the other activists because they became active like in their teens and early 20s. So at the time he was doing this he was keeping a journal because it was so life changing for him. So I have like four years of journal entries from him and letters he wrote to his family and then he was also in the newspaper a lot. So he had some of those articles. And this is for all the activists. I did a search through our library. We have subscriptions to all the local newspapers and newspapers across the country so look one of my activists was in Rhode Island and I was able to look at all of his local newspapers as well. And so I ran a search on all variations of their name and for some of the activists they were leaders in the community. So I would get back like 150 articles and I went through every article to see which ones were significant and which ones some of them were for other things happening in their lives but all the ones that

were talking about their activism they went into my database. And then Melinda my activists I'm talking about earlier she kept everything and she had helped start the NAACP. At one of our local communities in 1949. I had all the NAACP records from 1949 till the 1980s for her which was like 3000 pages. And with that I also did a search where I would search her name. However some of them were handwritten at the times I knew she was the most active because she was the president at the height of the civil rights movement. So I read all those documents anything from 1959 to 1964 I read all of them and then she also just kept everything. So I had probably like 50 newspaper articles from the 1960s when she spoke on behalf of the NAACP. They would go to her for anything going on in the country they would go to her and she would speak on it. And then she also had like books and calendars and she wrote in a diary every day. So I had that there were only a couple of activists that I didn't have a huge amount of external documents just really two of them. And that's more because they weren't leaders in the community but there were some newspaper articles on them. They were also very big on writing op eds. So those were very useful because all the activists wrote op eds in the newspaper but they also gave me document on the things that they were active in. So they were both antiwar activists. They had flyers and different documents like that. So it took me a couple years to gather all of that and I also had to clean it because it was typewritten and it wasn't like you know word documents so I had to retype a lot of that and clean it up to be able to make it codable to Atlas TI which is the software I used.

[00:22:42] Great well thanks for explaining more about that because I think it's really interesting and I would think we would both want to put in a plug to people to keep their records.

[00:22:54] Yes oh absolutely. Because they are really rich so and there's things you can't get. Now like for me to be able to pull the articles from the 1960s that would have taken me way more time but they just had them they have the articles. So I was able to photocopy them and then read typed them so I could decode them.

[00:23:13] Okay great. So going back to your research questions then and what you found you talked and correct me if I get anything wrong here. You talked about how they navigated a lifelong activism journey how they conceptualized social justice and developed their sense of social justice was important to how they also defined social problems and they were motivated by religion and leaders both local and national and they were sustained by relationships and when they ran into barriers they found meaning in that that appear to solidify their activism.

[00:23:58] Yes I wanted to say one other thing about the barriers to and that I mean when they were describing these things so one of my activists is actually in academia. He also went to Yale Yale Divinity. He was a professor he's retired now but he was placed in a field internship in late 1962 in the south. He was in Nashville Tennessee and he talked about the barriers that he faced and one of them was he worked with an activist an African-American man who was signing up voters was using his place in the community to help get more people registered to vote which was very dangerous because this man that he worked with lived in Mississippi. This activist died. He was murdered by the KKK. This was someone that the activists I interviewed worked with that had a profound impact on him. It was his baptism by fire into the civil rights movement and other people talked about one of the activists worked with someone who was working with Medgar Evers when he was murdered. And they talked about how they knew that it was literally life threatening the work that they were doing. But that didn't matter to them because the cause was so important that they would rather risk their lives and risk their safety than to not do the work. Like it just wasn't an option it was really just who they were as people. And they are still those people. The only barrier that prevented them from doing activism was a lack of funds. So if they were trying to do an action and they didn't have the money to do it that was the only one that prevented them. All of the other barriers they may change the way they were doing the action or they may change the strategy but they continue to work on the cause.

[00:25:43] What did you discover about the strategies that they used to work towards social change.

[00:25:48] So what I found when I looked at all of the evidence including their interviews and all the documentation that I had was what they really described was an activism cycle so that activism cycle had I divided up into four stages. So the first stage was really the preparatory stage. This began with recognizing the need which is a little bit of common sense but they they talked about that they talked about the first time they recognized the need for social change and then also how they would recognize the need for change later in their activism career that they would discover a new social cause essentially. So that was really the first step in activism was seeing that there's a need for change and that kind of loops back to that defining social justice in defining those problems. But as far as getting to an action that was really important and then the next thing they would do is they would really think about that. I called contemplation they would think about their social position. So if I'm a white man in the 1960s what impact can I have on civil rights. And where do I fit into this movement. So they spend a lot of time thinking about that. The skills they possessed then they would usually talk to other activists. This happened a lot of times in the social change organization or social change group where they would speak to other people about the social problem what do we think we can do. Is there an action here and then sometimes not everyone did this but sometimes they would investigate the social problem further and they would do this through informal informal research because I had a couple of people who had PhDs or they would work with PhDs. These were people who were researchers and they would look and try to get a better grasp of find what the problem is and where lived then they would divide the task among themselves. So that was really kind of that first stage is really preparing getting themselves mentally they're talking with other people and getting a grasp of the social problem then they would move into what I call the organization stage at this point. They would either joining a social change organization or they would start their own. This was similar to what Melinda did with the NAACP. There wasn't an NAACP in her environment. So she along with several of her peers they started an NAACP in her community to address the problem of racial injustice. So that was the next step. Let's get an organized unit together to be able to combat this social problem. And then during this stage they would also recruit allies. So sometimes they'd be recruiting other activists a lot of them would reach out to churches or civic groups to see if they can get people involved and interested in what they were doing. The other thing they did during this stage was to train people and the training was interesting because sometimes they would train for a specific social action and then other times they would train essentially for the social movement. Merle the activists I described who was in the south in the 1960s he talked about working with SNICC the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They were instrumental in getting the voting registration. So he was trained on how to do voter registration but also how do nonviolent interactions. And that went across the board and in every action that he did whereas others trained for specific actions but that always happened in this organization stage and then the last thing they did was detailed planning of the event. So they couldn't just throw together a demonstration or an education opportunity. They had to make secure space. They had to make flyers they had to advertise for it. They had to get speakers. There was a lot of work into doing a social action. And so that happened in this organization stage and then the next stage was the actual actions stage. And they described six different forms of activism. One was advocating almost everything they did was advocating but when I talked about advocating here I'm talking specifically about they advocated to people in positions of power. So either people who worked in the government or people who owned businesses or were CEOs or hiring managers at different companies they would go and advocate for policy change either in an organization or at the government level and working on creating policies or blocking policies if they were oppressive. So that was the first action that they really described. I lumped a bunch of actions they did into what I called creative methods so one of these was dialogue. They would get people from different membership groups together to talk. The purpose of this was interesting because sometimes the purpose was to try to change how people think about an issue. But other times it was just to

humanize people and oppress membership group. An example of this was Reverend Lamar. He worked with people all over the community and different leadership positions and other religions. He was Protestant. He worked with the Catholics and he talked about how they disagreed on several issues. He believed in open and affirming churches. He made his church open and affirming in 1960s. He believed that women should have positions of power in religious organizations. He was pro-choice and was very public about being pro-choice and he said like I know that will never will never agree. Like me and the head of the Catholic Diocese we'll never agree on these points but we discussed them just to be able to get on the table so like his goal wasn't necessarily to change how the person thought but to really humanize people and the groups that you know people who identify as LGBTQ are you know women having rights and different things. So that was the purpose. They also did things like singing one of my activists she used creative methods a lot she had a puppet she allowed me to take photographs it's like six feet tall puppets. She did some actions around protesting Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. And so she would wear the jumpsuits and cover her head like they do the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and she'd go to public hearings dressed like that. So different creative things that they used and then demonstrating. I use that word for anything that involved a public gathering whether included walking or not. What was interesting was that the antiwar activists used demonstrating a lot that was there one of their main actions was to demonstrate. So some of them have weekly demonstrations that are still going on that started after 9/11. But the activists who did not identify as anti war activists they very seldom use demonstrations. And when they did it was to support groups who were oppressed in society. So like they would demonstrate for civil rights. But the purpose was to stand in support of people who lived in Birmingham Alabama or like one of them organized a demonstration after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. But they didn't see that as the avenue for creating change. They saw more supporting other other groups of people who were oppressed a public show of support. Another action that was really popular that they all used was educating the public and they did this in several ways. A lot of them used the media. So they talked to the newspaper all the time. They were interviewed on television and they were just very engaged with getting the word out and whatever their cause was. They also held conferences. And what I called workshops so they would go to college campuses. They would go to community groups and talk about whatever the social problem was. So like when Melinda worked with the NAACP for the five years she was president they did over 450 workshops in the community talking about racism. So that type of work. And then another action that I found a little bit surprising I wasn't expecting was providing resources. This was different. They coined the phrase do gooder do good or work with more charity like a soup kitchen. They didn't consider that activism. They consider that just providing resources providing resources as an action was different. They were looking at providing something for people who didn't have access to it. So Melinda was instrumental in getting a community college in our local community. Here she was the one who chaired the committee to decide if they were going to build a community college she ran the study to say that there was a need for it and she was instrumental because she believed that education should be affordable. And her parents were African-American born in 1882 and they weren't allowed to go to school so neither one could read or write. So she felt it was very important that people have access to affordable education. And so she was instrumental in getting this community college which thousands of people have graduated from. Now there was two activists who started a school for children in Nicaragua. Again the children wouldn't have had access to education if not for this school that was seen as an action. And then the last one was writing letters. This was really popular with the Vietnam War. And anything just to let politicians know I think it's equivalent to our current day move on campaigns or you know calling your congressman things like that. So those were the actions that they described and then the last stage of this activism cycle was called the follow up stage. So after they did an action they would assess that action to see OK what went well what didn't go well. What can we do next time. What did we learn. So this stage was really just to improve the action for the next time because they were involved in these movements that are still going on like the civil rights movement environmental things so they were constantly looking on how to improve the next movement and try to make change. So those were the four stages they

described in this cycle and then the other thing I added to this were the resources because they couldn't have done any of this work without resources. So they talked about the people that they worked with and they were instrumental organizations the need for funds and then their activism materials things like signed flyers things like that.

[00:36:39] Did any patterns emerge where particular strategies more effective for particular issues. Did they have a sense did they have any opinions about what was more effective versus least effective in certain circumstances. I'm just curious.

[00:36:59] Yeah because I was really interested in that too. And so everything they did was very logical so they would have a purpose for every action. There was a purpose for that action. They have three targets of change. One was individuals that where they really wanted to impact the way people thought about a social problem their perspectives their beliefs and their actions as well. The other target change was what I termed practical change and that was impacting the culture of the system or a structure that was deemed oppressive. And then the last change was a policy change looking to change laws and governing procedures. So for example when they had the goal of changing a policy the advocating was the most effective strategy that they used. So they developed relationships with their local politicians and they would always have data to back up what they were doing. So one of my activists actually work with social work researchers at Brown University and the social workers would give him the information and then he would go to the governing with he called them like we had these white papers and he goes I would go to the governor and I would go to the legislators and say look here's the proof here's the data we have. So that was very effective. Actually the same activist he was in Rochester at the time that Rochester was having racial issues in the 1960s. So he talked about working with came to Rochester for like a year so he worked with him and then leaders from the civil rights movement. So black leaders came up and they worked with people at Kodak which was one of the big businesses in Rochester at the time and Xerox and they worked with them on changing the practice because they were hiring African-Americans. And when they get higher than they were only hiring them for low level jobs a lot of that they were advocating with the people in charge that you need to hire people who are qualified for higher level positions and you need to integrate your company. And they were reportedly very successful in doing that. That was a very effective one and then a lot of them were hard to gauge the dialogue when they would do the dialogue to try to get people from different membership groups to talk and to be able to understand each other. There wasn't really a way to measure that. Like the success of that bit their goal was to build bridges so they tended to do that a lot. So they would do like weekly meetings or they would meet together a lot. But there wasn't a way to really know without talking to the people who were there. How impactful it was if their goal was to raise awareness about something so this would be more individual change to raise people's awareness of a social problem. They used educating the public a lot and that was really just to get the information out that this is what's happening this is what it looks like and they use different methods to do that. There were some things they could say that this was successful and there was a lot of things that they didn't know. But they you know they would have a good turnout or they'd have a lot of people come so they would take that as a good step forward.

[00:40:15] Is there anything else that you learned through the process that you'd like to mention.

[00:40:21] I am someone that has been working for social change and I tend to have a very bold personality for change to come about that like we just need to openly discuss this and more of a bull in a china shop type of personality. And it was really good for me to talk to these activists with all different types of personalities. Reverend Lamar I've mentioned several times is just the kindest gentlest soul who very much used love and really gentle techniques and tactics to bring people together and so it really does show me that there's multiple ways to impact change and that you don't have to have one personality to do it anyone can work in their own way to impact change in

their environment. That was one of the things that really struck me.

[00:41:17] What do you think are the implications of your research for social work practice and education

[00:41:23] I really look to education and practice together. And I was really coming from the perspective of I had just gotten out of an MSW program like what I think would have been helpful to learn so that perspective knowing that there are a lot of seasoned social workers who probably already have these skills and are utilizing these skills to put together for novice social workers and social work students. So one thing I thought was a good implication was those intellectual processes that I described with really defining social justice because we use the term social justice in our schools social welfare all the time. We talk about social justice but what does that mean and what does it mean to you. Because what I describe as social justice may not be what the student sitting next to me describes as social justice or the professor or whoever. So really I think it would be a good exercise to teach people to really what do you mean when you say social justice also to teach our students and novice social workers to identify a social problem to really have a strong grasp on that and to understand where those problems live. Like to say and I know that seems very common sense but sometimes those common sense things are what we need to say out loud and explicitly. So that was one thing. Another thing was I thought we could replicate the motivational factors that the activists talked about because really all of them but one became an activist as a teenager or as a young adult in college and they were highly impacted from their college experience and from the professors that they had. So I think that we do a good job of talking about the values the social work values and the ethics that really getting students involved with that. So one of the things that our school piloted this year was a class on social activism and it was for second year amongst the students and they took the whole year and they did an action project. So using things that motivated the activists in my study to motivate the students in the MSW program things like having local community organizers come in and speak in classes or just bringing them to campus talking about the values and how this is our value system and that we're called the work for social change. And then I think it would also be very helpful to teach the cyclical nature of change because one of the thing all the activists talked about was that change takes an incredibly long time. The women talked about how you know when they went to college they had three choices. They could be a teacher a nurse and then they could not go to college and be a secretary. Those were the only occupations that were available to them. And they talked about how women now have the option to do most things that we want to do. The door's open for us but it took years to get to that point. Teaching that change takes a long time. And that failure doesn't mean that you should not act that you that you reassess. OK that did not go well why didn't go well. What can we do differently next time. And just to come to expect that it's going to take a while to see change. And then the other thing that I thought was really good is one of them was an academic in religion and the other two were preachers. They had these religious professions. And I noticed that all three of them used their profession and their activism work and particularly with LGBTQ causes that they would publicly really denounce. The moral argument against LGBTQ rights and they would say you know as a preacher this Bible verse is misquoted all people. This is what this teach us. They would use that professional position. And I think if we could find a way to really use our professional position as social workers that look work we're trained to create change and to know how to create change and to be able to say that this is our expertise and to be able to use that in and social movements would be great.

[00:45:38] Yeah the ministers it sounds like use their position very strategically.

[00:45:43] Yes that's a great way to put it. I think that's something that we can learn how they did that. And I have a quote in my study of one of them said that if you want to be popular you're not going to be an activist. So they all recognize when you step out and take a position they're going to

be people who are not happy with you and they're going to people who don't like you and there's going to be people who talked about you and that you just accept that as part of being an activist. And that's something these preachers really did because they publicly defended positions that weren't popular even sometimes in their own congregations and definitely in the Christian community.

[00:46:17] Well we certainly see that these days with the movement for racial justice how it's met with such virulent racism.

[00:46:26] Right. Yes that's exactly right.

[00:46:29] And what are the implications for future research. What is next for you and your research.

[00:46:35] I'm getting ready to defend my dissertation in two weeks so I'm still on this track. But one of the things the chair of my dissertation committee she did introduce me at the last conference we went to her publisher because she thought that this might make a really good book. She's probably more on the sociological side of the publishing company than the social work side. So I would like to pursue that. I don't feel like I'm quite done with the activists yet. I have a lot of data on Melinda and Melinda unfortunately passed away about 18 months ago. But I really thought about possibly pursuing her story and writing a book on her activism and her life because I think a story that is incredibly powerful and she was a very effective activist. And the other thing that I would like to do doing the data that really shows the societal markers that shows oppression. We know there's racial injustice in the schools and I know there people who research that we know that the media reports much differently depending what membership group someone belongs to. That's something that really interests me is to be able to do some of the studies that people in oppressed membership groups they have their voices heard. I like qualitative method so I like to hear from them and their perspectives and what they think and then also building the case of like here's how we know that racism exists in our society. Here are the different markers or here's how we know sexism exists both those types of things. I know that's a big order.

[00:48:14] Okay great. Well thank you Sam. Thanks very much for the time that you spent with us.

[00:48:21] Thank you I've really enjoyed it and I really appreciate it.

[00:48:24] You've been listening to Samantha Fletcher discuss lessons learned from lifelong social activists on inSocialWork.

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