

inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 1 - Hon. Lisa Bloch Rodwin: Social Workers in the Justice System

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. My guest today is the honorable Lisa Bloch Rodwin. Judge Rodwin is a nationally known expert on domestic violence and newly appointed family court judge for Erie County New York. Judge Rodwin has been a leader in the Erie County Coalition Against Family Violence and has spearheaded efforts which led to reductions in family violence homicide rate from 15 to just 1 in the last two years. She was the first prosecutor outside of New York City to add social workers to the staff of a district attorney's office as part of a multi disciplinary team. The unit has helped thousands of women and children find safety judge Rodman is the recipient of numerous awards for her work on behalf of families affected by domestic violence and has been featured on Oprah and 2020 with Diane Sawyer. Conversation begins with a discussion of her recent appointment to the County Family Court. You were appointed by Governor David Paterson and confirmed unanimously. That must have been wonderful to have a unanimous confirmation.

[00:01:45] It was very exciting because every single member of the New York State Senate Republican and Democrat joined in my confirmation and what was also very wonderful was that every member of the Western New York delegation every single senator from both sides of the aisle got up to speak to commend the governor on his appointment of me. And then after they finished speaking about me the entire Senate stood up and gave me a standing ovation which actually brought tears to my eyes. Wow that's wonderful. That's wonderful. And sort of a testament not sort of but a testament to your work that you've done all these years now. So you start seeing cases tomorrow. Yes. What are the differences between the criminal court and family. Well criminal court happens when someone picks up the phone and dials 911. So I'm going to focus mostly on family violence issues because that's my area of expertise. I was head of the very first Family Violence Unit and the DA's office in New York state outside of New York City. We formed that in 1995. We started in informing the bureau in the mid 90s probably when you were in kindergarten I wish when we formed the unit we realized very early on that social workers were an essential component. And actually my bureau was the first bureau in the district attorney's office to employ social workers. But you would ask for the difference of criminal court versus family court criminal court happens when someone is in a moment of crisis picks up the phone calls the police and says Help. I don't know what to do my my child is threatening me my child is being abused. My partner is threatening me. Something is happening now and I need the police now. They then come into court and the resolutions are generally you can go to jail. You can go on probation. You can go into counseling it's a criminal disposition.

[00:03:52] Family court is where families turn when they want a judge to help them solve an immediate problem in their families. You have a custody dispute where people can't figure out what the visitation or custody situation should be for my kid because the child's other parent isn't listening or isn't appropriate for my child. You have child abuse and neglect. Somebody a reporter calling in and saying this child is being taken care of properly. Mom has a mental health issue. Dad's a drug or alcohol issues child is coming in with bruises child looks like they're not being given clean clothes. They're not being given food at home. Or worst case scenario child is being sexually abused or terribly physically abused. Then you have juvenile delinquency and what's called pin's or persons in need of supervision. My kid is out of control. They're staying out till 1 2 in the morning they are 12 years old they're hanging out with bad kids. I don't know what to do. Family Court help me or juvenile delinquent my kid was caught shoplifting at the Gallery mall. My

kid was caught stealing someone's car. And then of course you have domestic violence. You have a whole park here in this court building domestic violence part. My partner my children's father my children's mother is threatening me is hurting me. I don't know what to do I need help. So all of these people turn to the family court system for help with a person they're related to by blood or marriage or child in common.

[00:05:32] Those are things things you need in family court criminal court is picking up a phone and saying I need someone arrested now. So that's pretty much a difference. So you took the oath of office on June 29. Yes. And your first case is tomorrow. I've been shadowing the other judges. They've been allowing me to sit on the bench next to them. And I've been shadowing them in every single part of court for all the different types of cases so that I will be ready to hear cases in my first cases are scheduled tomorrow. So do you feel overwhelmed at all by the challenge. Well yes I mean in a word yes. But the issues are the same. The shoes of families in crisis do not change whether it's a family in crisis in the criminal court or a family in crisis in the Family Court. It's broken people and broken families who turn to a judge and say I don't know how to fix this problem. I need help. And that's what Family Court is the most intensive courts because you have far more cases than in any other court. I mean for example in Supreme Court it's businesses suing other businesses or somebody suing a doctor or a contract being broken. These are people's lives at a moment of extreme intensity when they are in crisis. So that's a huge responsibility huge. And you have to decide for all you have to try to help the people decide on their own. I know I don't intend to substitute my decisions for theirs. I want to have them get the resources they need so they can make decisions now and in the future.

[00:07:23] That's the key and that's why I think using social workers here is important in getting them to that point. And you mentioned before that you were the first to include a social worker in a district attorney's office. What prompted that. Well when I started the Domestic Violence Bureau in 95 it became incredibly obvious to me immediately that I didn't have the skill set necessary or the training necessary to deal with the emotional part of a family in crisis. So a domestic violence situation is very different than a child abuse situation is very different than other crimes. If somebody breaks into your house and steals your TV your steals your car you're pissed off you're going to say I'm coming to court and I'm going to get that person who stole my car or stole my TV. How dare they do that. But if the father of your child smacked you after drinking you guys were drinking together or choked you in a moment of anger. You're going to have a lot of conflict about coming to court. Yes you called the police to have him stop choking you but you still want him in your home that night. So there's all of these other issues that have to be dealt with that are not part of what a prosecutor can resolve in a courtroom. So it became incredibly obvious to me that we needed social workers involved in our cases and we needed them involved. From the moment that we learned of the case at the present time in my bureau we have five full time social workers.

[00:09:06] We have one who works through Haven House and works in the town and village courts. We have one person who is working through Hispanics United is a Latina bilingual social worker. We have two social workers who work in the Buffalo City Court and we have another social worker who works in the felony domestic violence court and the integrated Domestic Violence Court. Honestly those social workers are stars they're their heroes in my book because a social worker helps an individual get the tools they need. To get on with their life and a lawyer in a DA's office or even a judge can't always give you tools. They can connect you with people who give you the tools and teach you. And that's why I have so much respect for social workers and they've been such a huge part of everything I've done professionally in the field of domestic violence and child abuse. I helped to set up all the process and procedures for the Child Advocacy Center and that's the child abuse facility for all of your county and I developed the initial grant and the process and procedures for the family justice center which is the one stop shop for adult victims of domestic violence. And in each of those facilities the first person you meet is a social worker and the person who helps you

through the system is a social worker. So that's why I know that the training that you receive in a school of social work what you learn on the job in your internships and what you learn in each of your jobs after graduating gets you to the place you need to be to help the families that come into these courthouses.

[00:10:54] It's interesting because you recently spoke at the graduation of a school social worker that you be. Yes it was wonderful and everyone enjoyed your remarks. And one of my colleagues censored me how impressed he was about what you said and I asked him you know what what really impressed you and you said it's because you you got it that you respected you understood the role of a service worker and you respected it. And so I'm wondering how did you get it. That's a really interesting question. How did I get it. Well I guess I got it by doing you know my bureau in the DA's office handled 4000 families a year. This building Family Court handles thirty eight thousand petitions a year. First of all you see when you see the volume you understand immediately that as a lawyer you can only handle the surface legal issues but you can't possibly handle as a lawyer the issues that lead them the underlying issues that lead them to the point where they involve the legal system. So who is best trained to help someone understand tell you as a lawyer understand how this family got here and what they need to get to the point where they're safe in the future because that's the goal in the domestic violence and child abuse unit. And that's the goal in family court being fair being impartial and keeping people safe. So speaking of being impartial. So as you switch from this role of being a prosecutor tireless advocate you know day in day out what do you perceive as the biggest challenge to switching to the other side of the bench of being an impartial judge.

[00:12:53] I think the tendency would be to go too far the other side. To show how fair you are. Obviously everything I did as a DA was to hold perpetrators accountable in a criminal justice system perpetrators of domestic violence perpetrators of child abuse perpetrators of sexual abuse. I'm not here as a judge in family court to hold people accountable. I'm here to help families stay safe and resolve the issue help children stay safe and resolve the issues in a way where you don't assess blame blame is not an issue in family court blame is not a factor. What you have to do is just to figure out what the problems are and what is the next steps that can be taken so that you can resolve the situation in a safe way. If it's a child in a PINS petition there's the family treatment. The children come first program for example for custody cases which involve social workers. You have the family treatment court that involves social workers in almost every part in this building. You have social workers involved whether it's juvenile delinquents who are placed in facilities with social workers whether it's persons in need of supervision or you have the wrap services surrounding the family with supports so that they can deal with these issues. Whether you have as I said a custody issue domestic violence. We send people to the family. The Family Justice Center and make referrals for treatment or counseling programs for the persons who are alleged to have committed the Family Violence Act. I mean the issue this isn't a jail court. This is a court where we're trying to treat broken families.

[00:14:45] And it's incredibly emotionally intense in this building in in the week and a half that I've been here. I have seen children who have been physically abused by their parents children who've been sexually abused by a member of the family juveniles who've been accused of violent crimes who have seriously hurt other adults custody and visitation cases where the persons seemed to have an inability to take a step back and do what's best for their child because of the emotional intensity of the case. And then on occasion yesterday I helped supervise two adoptions which was total joy. And we also supervised some parental terminations. You have people's lives in their most complex and most intense moments. Coming into this building and so given that intensity as well as given although there are some wonderful things like the adoption but a lot of horrible things that you'll see that you have seen through your years as a prosecutor. One of the things that we try to teach our social work students is health care. That's the point. You know get up another day and face the

battle again. What do you do to keep your head on straight. Well we have the normal situation the situation right now normal situation is you go hang out with your family and friends. You make sure you make time for yourself you go to the movies you go out to dinner or you have a beer you know you go for a picnic. You make sure that at least some time every week you have time with your family and friends. Unfortunately I'm not a normal situation mode right now because I'm in campaign mode because I have to run to keep this job.

[00:16:43] So every night I'm out three four hours a night meeting people talking about my qualifications. So I get to stay in this wonderful job and contribute to my community in the place that I think is the best fit for me. But when I was doing the prosecution there were days and there's no denying it. There will be days for every social worker or lawyer in this field that you come home and you feel that the life blood has been squeezed out of you and that you have given everything you have inside of you to the people you're trying to assist. What helped me was then I sat down to dinner and my son started throwing peas at each other across the table quoting The Simpsons or or Futurama which apparently is the only thing that is a considered educational. On television these days at least for boys. That gives me balance and perspective you know sitting down and doing flashcards with them for the spelling bee or whatever you have to have a life outside of work. You got to have a life outside of work especially if you choose social work or the legal field. Involved with the families because if you don't you won't be effective when you get up the next day. You have to be able to take a deep breath and just change your focus. You mention having to run for office. Now you've had a successful career as a criminal prosecutor. You started the domestic violence bureau in 95. You are its chief. You set up a dedicated domestic violence court in Buffalo actually three thread. There's one for the city of Buffalo.

[00:18:29] I set up the felony domestic violence part for all of your county and I work to help set up the integrated domestic violence court for people who have issues in family court divorce court and criminal court. They all come before one judge instead of going to three different court some and in addition to that you obtained a million dollar grant to started the Erie County Family Justice Center for Domestic Violence. Yes and you've won numerous accolades and awards. Yes. And now you and I got to be on Oprah and I got to be on Oprah and Juani 23 times. Wow that's a great picture. As you're looking at a picture of me and Oprah on the white sofa I however did not jump on the sofa again. So why give all that up for a job you could lose. Well first of all I don't intend to lose it. Yeah. And second of all I think that I can make more of a difference here. I have had a wonderful opportunity in the DA's office to make huge changes the way it domestic violence child abuse cases are treated now is entirely different than it was when I started. You have the social workers you have the specialized courts. You have the referrals to the support services through the Family Justice Center and the Child Advocacy Center. But I have no more challenges over there. I know I've changed everything I could possibly change. So now I want to turn my focus and energy and passion to a new arena. And that's family court because this is ground zero.

[00:20:13] Family court is ground zero for families in crisis and children who need help. And if you really care passionately This is the place to be and this is where I can make a difference. Now when I was in the criminal justice arena I was pretty good at working with people like social workers and law enforcement and judiciary and support services to think outside the box and see what we could do to change systems. And I certainly intend to try to bring people together and do that in the future. And I think that when you work with other types of occupations especially social workers you can see new ways to approach problems. It's not like domestic violence or child abuse was invented 10 years ago. This problem has been with us since the time a man. You know these issues it's just that they haven't always been dealt with in judicial systems. So if we recognize that there is always going to be these problems if we recognize that there are always going to be families who because of mental health emotional health physical health addiction issues have problems. If we recognize that there are people who are going to hurt children intentionally or unintentionally that's the reality

that there are people who are going to hurt people they love. That's the reality. How do you keep those people safe. How do you make sure it doesn't happen again. That's what this building is about. That's what I'm about. So what can we do in our little corner wherever you choose to work as a social worker or as a lawyer.

[00:22:00] What can you do in your little corner to make a change for one person at one time at one day. And if you do that you've succeeded. That's what going into this field is all about. That's why I have such admiration for social workers because you're willing to put yourself on the line and take your talent and take your hard work and skill and say I'm going to devote it to this little corner of this little tiny group of people and I'm going to make a difference. And the thing is if you make a difference one person at a time then you've succeeded because one person had ripples as I spoke at the commencement. There's this interconnected web of humanity and one person can the change you make to one person has that effect on people. You will never meet some who are alive now somewhere maybe you aren't even born yet but you as a social worker can make that change if you help that person get the skills that they need to deal with the problem they have. And that's why I think it's such an awesome profession and I have so much respect for them. As someone who has that respect and has an understanding and has sort of an outsider's perspective is if there was something you would change about social workers social workers what would it be. Wow that's a tough question. Wow OK. What would I change about social workers. Well I certainly think that it's excellent. Now that social worker social work school includes on the job training in the reality of the trenches. Something I would change I guess the one thing I would change is I think that it's horrendous that social workers are paid so ridiculously low.

[00:23:54] I think teachers and social workers. My parents were both teachers. And I think it's obscene that their skills and their contributions are so grossly undervalued as compared to a stockbroker or a businessman. I mean I think that it's good to help the economy obviously everybody wants to earn decent living but when I see the salaries of the people who are putting themselves out day in and day out to make a change in the world I find that obscene. As I said to you earlier judges don't have magic wands in my back pocket. I have a very limited ability to change the world. But what I can do is to make sure that social workers become more entrenched in systems whether it's a family court system or a criminal court system so that once they're in a system at least they receive their salary and benefits of a system and the respect that being part of a system and genders. So Lisa Bloch Rodwin if there is one thing that you would impart to our listeners and our listeners or researchers academics practitioners and the occasional general public person what would it be. What wisdom would you share about what you've learned in this field. There is nothing that can't be changed. There is no system that can't be changed. There is no process that can't be changed. You have to be patient. You have to be able to perhaps bend your initial ideas so that you can move for them to get to where you want to go. And you have to be able to work with other systems to get change to occur.

[00:25:45] That plus even if all you do this week is to help one person do one thing that is a success and you need to be able to measure success in terms of one person at a time. So on the macro scale reaching across boundaries to change systems and on the micro scale if you help one person then you have fulfilled your oath as a social worker and that is an awesome thing and you should be proud of that darn proud of that that. And also please remember to vote on primary vote counts. Well great. Thank you very much for your time. Thank you you've been listening to a podcast featuring an interview with the honorable Lisa Bloch Rodwin of Erie County New York family court judge discussing the important role social workers have on legal teams that serve victims of family violence. We hope you've enjoyed this presentation. Visit our website to hear more lectures and conversations about social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community with more information

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