

Episode 100 - Dr. Nancy Smyth: The UB School of Social Work: Adventures and Future Ideas in a Digital Age

[00:00:08] Welcome to LIVING PROOF A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. 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. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed our podcasts as evidenced by the more than 250000 downloads to date thanks to all of you. We'd like to know what value you have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcast in your classrooms. Just go to our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcasts and click on the contact tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. Hi from Buffalo. Oh yes another 80 degree low humidity July day with lake breezes. I'm Peter Sobota. It's our one hundredth episode to celebrate our hundredth episode of our podcast. We have invited our dean Nancy Smyth and director of online programs Tony Guzman to take a look back on our series and discuss why a school of social work entered into this area. Nancy discusses her vision for the future of our series as well as her vision for the UB School of Social Work.

[00:01:58] Nancy concludes by describing her thoughts on the role of technology in the social work profession as well as the risks and opportunities Nancy Smith Ph.D. is dean and professor at the UB School of Social Work. She was interviewed by our new director of online programs Tony Guzman My name is Tony Guzman. I'm here with the dean of the School of Social Work University at Buffalo. Dean Nancy Smyth we are celebrating our hundredth pod cast of The Living Proof series from the school of social work and as such. We figured for this Mousehole we would interview with in-house so to speak. So it is a pleasure to introduce dean Nancy Smyth I had a few simple questions and being that we're celebrating the hundredth podcast. It's a good time to look back and be able to say or find out. What would you say are the reasons for the success of the living proof podcast series. Let me take a moment and think back when we came up with it because I think a lot of people thought we were crazy when we first thought about doing this for a while actually we had staff and faculty are thinking about podcasts and that was really just our decision to move forward with it and our main concern and the main thing on my mind at the time we decided to do this was that there's a whole new generation of young people called the millennial generation and even some of the Generation X who came before them who get most of their information and their knowledge of the world on the Internet. And at the time we did this which was three and a half years ago. Social work had a very minimal presence on the Internet.

[00:03:41] And I had a lot of concerns that we were going to miss a group of people who were really well disposed to the things that we do really passionate about social change and making a difference in the world and yet they might not know anything about us as a profession. So it seemed to me we needed some way to start to establish a presence for the profession there and we knew enough about the internet to have a sense that if you make good content and just let people know about it reasonably that it starts to get itself out there. So that was really why we chose the podcast we figured we could start to talk about some particular social issues as they relate to social work researcher were practice to research and then just really teach people about who the profession is and so we really wanted to involve people from all over the country as well as people doing work that might be relevant to social work but maybe they weren't social workers. And the goal might be to attract people to the profession and also I think just to provide some really quality content for social work on the Internet. So when I look at those calls I think we've done pretty well. I mean I look at the downloads which you know you never know who's listening to those downloads. But

what I'm told is we just passed about 260000 downloads and that were listened to in all 50 states and 190 countries depending on how you sort of see those things on your Web site. We can't really look at the iTunes data and know where that's getting downloaded from.

[00:05:03] But I think more importantly I see a lot of interaction and people who talk about how the podcast has been really useful to that we have lot of faculty around the country who've used it in their classrooms and really said how helpful it was occasionally we get people who come out and write reviews and so that's helpful. But I see some dialogue sometimes on Twitter where people really like a particular podcast and actually my best story just came out this past week one of our faculty members came back from traveling abroad and she had met a psychologist abroad through a friend and they had lunch together and psychologist asked what she was from and she said oh the University of Buffalo School of Social Work and that person jumped in and said Oh my gosh that's the place that does the living proof podcast series and pulled out her smartphone and showed the podcast that she enjoyed listening to. And I thought well that's the power of social media on this topic. And I think she's got the most social work not just a social worker but to allied professions and to potential students. So from that standpoint I think it's been successful and I'm pleased that it's done as well. And I'm amazed because I thought it was a very aggressive schedule that the staff and faculty chose to do a podcast every two weeks. That was probably not the schedule I would have chosen. So the fact that we've made it to 100 episodes and kept that schedule up with really quality content I think is pretty astounding. Excellent. And so what would be your vision for the future of the podcast series. That's a good one I'd like to I'd be curious to hear some other people's vision about it.

[00:06:32] One of the things that I don't like about the series is I think our name isn't very helpful just because I don't think the name says what it's about. So people get confused about it. One of the things I heard from a lot of social work peers is that they weren't sure what it was about their words they thought it might just be promoting our graduates or talking about our school. And so my vision is partly I'd like to see the podcast maybe go through a process of renaming by involving listeners and coming up with a name that communicates a little more about what it's about. We can't take the name social work podcast because we have a colleague Jonathan Singer who doesn't wonderful podcast by that name but I'm convinced that listeners probably could come up with a better name than we could that would better capture what the podcast is about. And I think when you do that it you make it easier for other people to listen to it because there are people I suspect who've seen it who don't know what it's about. Haven't bothered to check it out. And I think that reaching more people would be easier to do with a different name. So that's a small thing but also a larger thing is when the group started working on the podcast they had a vision of social work research that was relevant to practice and bringing that out in the podcast but also the reverse what comes from practice that's important for research and informing research.

[00:07:51] And as I look over our topics I don't think we've done as good a job on that part of it as we have on the front part. So I would love to see us broaden a little bit not from our intention but broaden from how we've implemented it to allow for more of that dialogue because social work as a profession we have this dialogue back and forth about what's the role of research and practice was through the practice and research and I think the best minds now indicate we really it needs to be a dialogue it needs to be a back and forth to really improve what we're doing. And so I think making sure that we have some ways to better get those voices of practice to research and there would be a great way to think about continuing what we've been doing and complementing what we've been doing so far to those things I think would be the major ones I've often asked myself what's the next step for this. I'm not sure that I understood I know that. I mean I think right now there's still not that many social workers out there and I guess that the point at which the universe is flooded with podcasts related to social work maybe there will be a role for us and we'll go onto to whatever the next thing is for us to do. But I don't see that right now. Jonathan Singer and us and we have a huge

number because we've had the resources of an organization to put behind this and it seems particularly schools of social work are moving to more online programs as we're doing having content that people can listen to online is even more of a premium. And so I think that that demand is definitely still there.

[00:09:20] And I think for us it's been a very helpful way still to tell people about the profession. And then for people sometimes to choose the profession over a similar profession. I think all of those things certainly will be continued in the vision. And then I think at some point maybe we'll get saturated enough in this Internet that there'll be some next step that will start to emerge. But I've never been one of those people to plan specifically all of the things that follow and I try to do more as scan what's happening scan what's out there and see sort of organically what starts to emerge as the next direction. Well then you get to share what you see is your vision for the future of the school social work here at University of Buffalo. Well probably not limited to the podcast that we've had a reputation partly because of the podcast for integrating new technologies into what we do and I certainly think that's part of our vision but we're not always as far ahead on that as people think we are because of the podcast. I would love to see us just do that better as a school but do it with quality practice and quality education as our standard. I still say people you know sometimes a pencil is still your best tool to use for something. Sure and you know want to jump in and use a piece of technology just to use it. You want to use it because it makes the most sense for what your purpose is.

[00:10:44] So certainly would like to see the school continue to grow in that direction and we have some faculty who are doing some really wonderful work integrating technology as it's appropriate into their classes and their research and teaching. So that's a direction I think the changes we've made in our master's program to integrate trauma informed and human rights perspectives have been really transformational much more so than I would have predicted for the master's program and for the school as a whole and have placed us in a position now being able to establish partnerships with people around the country in the world related to being leaders in that area and I certainly see the school building on that strength as you look through our podcast by topic we cover all different types of topics certainly trauma is the one that we are probably got the most numbers of episodes for. And quite a few human rights too. So we're working in both those areas. And so I think that in this role we all have to find niches. And for us this is a really good niche and we want to build on it. The podcast will be part of bringing that great knowledge out to other people. But it's really going to be bringing knowledge that's been established by many people I mean what I did the podcast with Charles Figley who is really the father of the Traumatology field one of them anyway really incredibly well respected. I followed his work for years and thought Wow who would I like to talk to. Who would I like to hear from trauma. I just called them made up out of the blue. You didn't know me and I just asked him if he'd be willing to do a podcast on any topic that he'd like to talk about and he Yeah.

[00:12:14] And he wanted to talk about veterans issues and their families which was really important and I learned a great deal listening to him. And so I think what kind of content would be great for our students to have available to them and for the communities that we serve type available and that will guide the direction of our podcast as well as partly. The direction that the school goes but ultimately for a school the direction is set by its faculty and staff. As a teen I can share my thoughts I can point the way. But mostly you get great people who are doing exciting things and then just have to work together. And so I think as a school we'll be defining some of those things in the next couple of years. But I do think that the podcast is now really become our own. Many faculty have gotten involved in it and they certainly see that as being part of at least our immediate future. And finally what do you see as the future role of technology or the role of technology for the future. So for field that's a question I often wonder about. I'm a little concerned for the profession as we move into the 21st century. We are not by and large social workers are not

technology adopters. I wouldn't even say early we tend to be late adopters and yet things are changing so fast with this world that we're in right now.

[00:13:33] Sixty five percent of adults who are on the Internet now are into social media and I'm not sure that social workers understand the medium enough to be able to help their client populations with those things. Certainly when it comes to adolescence where you have 95 percent of them who are gaming most social workers I encounter have very negative perceptions about gaming and those are things that I think if we don't do a little better job of educating ourselves and getting familiar with some of these things we're in danger of becoming culturally irrelevant. And I think that's never good for a profession like ours to just focused on cultural competence. Now that said I think that if we can figure out how to use technology effectively from whether it's we're using it with our clients or using it to organize some social action like you've seen in some parts of the world that social workers would be ideal for the problems of our century social work by definition looks at systems and networks and many levels of change and the technologies that are now emerging are all about how to mobilize and work with those networks how to connect people and communicate and collaborate across vast distances. And then how to integrate that with face to face so I think it's perfect for us. And I'm optimistic because I think we can make this connection we're going to have some tools that will make our work much more powerful and relevant for the 21st century. And at the same time I get a little nervous because we can be a little technophobic. Now that said I'm seeing a lot of promising signs of people who are starting to venture into this who had held back. And technology is neither bad or good it's neutral.

[00:15:17] It's all about how you use it and I think that's really been the message I've tried to give to people is people using these technologies to connect to other people and that's what social works about is about relationships. We can see past the fact that it's happening over a telephone or happening via text message or happening via e-mail or in a Facebook group and see the fact that it's about people wanting to connect with people and about having problems with that sometimes or having some positive experiences that I think were really ideal to help people negotiate this universe but we can't do that if we're so ignorant of the technology that we can't help someone figure out. How do you set boundaries in a digital environment if someone is harassing me. How do I cope with that. And so I think it's a true time of of challenge and opportunity for us as a profession. I think integrating technology well into what we already know and helping ourselves grow in what we know will be the future for us and if we don't do it I'm not optimistic that social work will be the vital profession that it is at this moment 50 years from now. And so I think we're up to the challenge. But I think we need to start moving there a little faster than we have because the rate of change seems to be accelerating and we need to do it and ask all the important questions that we ask questions of ethics and questions about making sure that everybody gets included in these digital changes. We have a world that is giving people access to information. But if you don't have access to the same tools you are now out of the loop for information.

[00:16:51] And I think that's a social justice issues so for social work I think our issues would be very relevant to these technologies if we can't get people to start to think about it a little bit more than they happen. And as I said I've seen some positive signs. Maybe a year ago I had about 200 social workers that I was following on Twitter and it's probably up to 500 now and that's just the ones that I personally have noticed it's by no means a sort of assessment and there are some wonderful efforts going on in the U.K. with Open University initiatives that they have blogging and they sponsor social debates on Twitter. Sometimes week and I see some amazing social workers from around the world. So those things I see happening I think while it does seem like as a profession we're starting to get there. Excellent. Very good. Well I want to thank you for your time and sharing with us here on the podcast and looking forward to another hundred episodes. Thanks Tony. Me too. You've been listening to our hundreth episode in which Nancy Smyth discusses the living proof podcast series past present and future. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the

University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Here at UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.