

Episode 193 - Vic Compher and Rodney Whittenberg: "Portraits of Professional Caregivers: Their Passion, Their Pain"

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work 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 social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. Hi from Buffalo, June is terrific in western New York and many folks don't realize what a top notch bicycle town in Buffalo is. Developed paths and trails through our parks along our waterfront and our roadways in for all kinds of writers. I'm Peter Sobota. It's likely that most of us will need the help of a professional caregiver at some point in our lives. Who do you want to show up when you need them. In this episode our guests confer and Rodney Wittenburg discuss their professional experiences and their documentary film highlighting the work of professional caregivers and public servants. They've learned that a core trait and skill of all professional caregivers is empathy an essential ingredient of the helping process and an occupational hazard. Our guests want to raise public awareness of the nature of the work of caregivers the situations of their clients and especially the impact and potential secondary trauma on those who provide care to people in difficult situations.

[00:01:44] Our guests conclude our discussion by exploring options for caregivers self care and address organizational structures that provide crucial peer support to help manage the stress experienced by professional caregivers. Vic Compher LCSW producer director an educator began his encore career in filmmaking about 12 years ago. Some of his projects include caregiver's treasures of the elders peace of the elders and I cannot be silent. He has worked in child and family services geriatric counseling and hospice services in Philadelphia for over 30 years. His exploration of the subject of secondary trauma has made it increasingly clear that society in general has many unrealistic expectations of its professional caregivers and public servants Rodney Whittenberg coproducer and composer is founder of NoTie vision where he works as a creative consultant by using skills as a composer songwriter multi instrumentalist producer engineer filmmaker and educator. He is compose music for over 34 films and TV shows and countless dance performances. He's the creator and host of the podcast Praet concert and interviews show where listeners meet and preview upcoming performances. His work as a filmmaker centers around his passion for telling a story from start to finish in a creative way. Our guests were interviewed in March of 2016 by our own Susan Green LCSW clinical associate professor here at the School of Social Work. We'd like to mention that this episode contains some background distortion that is due to technical problems we experienced while recording thanks and we hope you like the podcast I'm going to first say thank you very much to Vic and Rodney for being here with me today. I had the great pleasure and opportunity to watch the video that you produced portraits of professional caregivers. Their passion their pain. What led the two of you to produce such a film. Well the film has been an idea I had for a long time.

[00:04:05] I worked for over 20 years and child protective services as a social worker and I realized during that time that the public has hardly an inkling perhaps no inkling of the nature of our work. The situation of our clients and the impact on the social workers emotionally physically spiritually in every area. The impact of doing this kind of work is kind of a hidden topic and often even in the profession we don't have enough awareness of it. We don't talk about it enough so the primary audience for the film. From my point of view is the public to educate. But secondly to bring these issues out into the open with the professionals themselves. So that is the aspiration that I've had for a number of years and I got to know Rodney when I was working on a previous film. And when I presented this idea to him he lit up and he can speak for himself right now. I've been working in the

music and film business for less 24 years. I just saw my LinkedIn profile. I started my company 24 years ago and Vic came to me with this idea of making a film about secondary trauma and before he even started explaining it to me I lit up because I knew it partially from my own personal life of the care I had to give to my grandmother and my dad and my grandfather when I was younger and then through it with a nice way of saying this through my significant others or partners throughout my life that have been social workers or therapists and I tend to surround myself have a lot of friends who work in the same field that they're victims and saw firsthand the impact of secondary trauma.

[00:06:03] It was a powerful listen and watch for me. I'll tell you that and I wrote down some things as I was listening in one of the pieces and I hope I wrote this down correctly. I remember hearing it being talked about that empathy is and can be an occupational hazard in the work that the both of you are talking about. Yes. Vic can you tell me more about what that is referring to. Well it's a term that both Senator gloom and Charles Figley have been using it as a sort of hidden vulnerability an exposure that a very caring person has and sometimes very unaware really as they are reaching out and opening their heart to the person they are taking care of and it can have an impact. And what we realize at this point in time is that it's normal. That doesn't mean something's wrong with you. It simply means that you're human. Your own humanity may be touched and it may be touched because you feel the pain and sorrow and grief that is present with you and your relationship with that client or patient that you're working with and maybe touch because it's their experience is similar to something that's happened in your life and it may touch you on that level it may remind you of something. And if that happens there should be no shame or stigma about that. The important thing is to be aware of when it may be happening and to reach out to one's peers or supervisor or someone that you really trust.

[00:07:48] You can debrief and address what is touching you when we just stuff it and try to act like we're so objective and above it all. Which is sometimes the professional aura that is fostered in some of our training we really fooling ourselves and it can mean that that grief for suffering or trauma may affect the quality of our practice and it may affect the quality of our lives in various ways. So broadening you made the comment of being a caregiver of your folks. Right. And of people in your family and I'm remembering in the film that certainly the term caregiver was spoken about down an umbrella term. But you know we're talking what from firefighters police officer doctors social workers those of us taking care of our loved ones. Can you say more about like who are we talking about here in terms of caregivers. We're talking about in the case of the film we're talking about anyone who is professionally giving care. And yes it's sort of a loosely defined definition of care. But when you think about it police officers being job is to. I mean they protect and serve us. They're there to care for us. The same thing with firefighters and first responders and neonatal nurses and Veterans Administration psychologists they're all there to care for us in some way. And so when Vic and I were going back and forth as to what we should call the film we tried coming up with a number of different titles and tossed it around and it just kept coming back to you. But there were all caregivers there are all people who give care and they are in some way have deal with trauma.

[00:09:30] And I will add that it's been really amazing as we screened the film to find how many professions we actually left out that we didn't even think of. One of them obviously you could think clergy. And then there's lawyers. You know both prosecutor and defense lawyers. But the one that really struck me was veterinarian's and how many veterinarians suffer from secondary trauma because of the pain that they go through having to give care to animals and in some cases animals that have been abused or hurt in all sorts of things. All of these professions people go into them with the idea of wanting a deep desire to make a difference to make the world a better place and that has to start with a sense of compassion that the person has even before they go into the profession. And it's really interesting you know as we're sitting here talking about I never thought of adding another group to that until just now. And that's artists and musicians as we all do the same thing too

we use our empathy and compassion in order to create work. And there is a danger there too I'm just going to getting a little too close and not in the same way. But it's it's it's interesting we all go into this you know with the idea of trying to make a difference and that carries the danger of getting too close and getting burned by the thing that we want to try and fix or help. Vic what exactly. You know what we're talking about secondary trauma. There's a term called secondary traumatic stress as TS or compassion fatigue we've heard of. We've also heard of vicarious trauma. What are some signs symptoms what are these things.

[00:11:10] Well there are a number of signs and symptoms and they kind of cluster in four categories. One is in the territory of ethic or feeling examples would be feelings of grief loss sadness anger resentment anxiety fear any of those would be affective symptoms. Others would be cognitive such as when one is feeling secondary trauma you may have difficulty concentrating you may be having some flashbacks and intrusive thoughts some memory lapses and nightmares. No one has all these same time but you could have any configuration and other territories physical sleep disturbance appetite change fatigue nauseous dizziness Rabbitt heartbeat. And then lastly the behavioral territory sometimes a overwhelmed worker may begin to seem or feel antisocial maybe withdraw from others. There may be avoidance opponents of those triggers that remind the caregiver sometimes of caregivers who are suffering second or trauma supplying their clients or stop liking particular types of clients or they may change professions. I think and child welfare for example the enormous turnover that we see a lot of I'm pretty confident has to do with secondary trauma. It's not just the lousy salaries which contribute to that problem and which is usually highlighted but I think the emotional risks that are involved if not also physical risk. So any of those four territories if what is being really reading one's own self those would be areas that you might have seen signs and symptoms can you flush out even more for our listeners like what is secondary traumatic stress. What is compassion fatigue what is vicarious trauma. What is burnout and you know what. There was actually a phrase that is in your film that might be that you guys coyness.

[00:13:14] It's being called rust out. So if you could differentiate amongst all of those that would be helpful. Let me start with that last one. RUSTOW which I first heard from John Weaver who is in the film and who is a very gifted red cross trainer as well as a volunteer. He was it right after the crash of the plane 9/11 in western Pennsylvania Shanksville spent two weeks taking care of the surviving families who came in to be at that site. And he considers that I believe sort of a variation of the term burnout burnout. It's a little different than secondary trauma. It has to do with the overwhelming demands and expectations the kind of uncertainly and unsupportive general environment that is sometimes found in organizations. One sort of asked to do the impossible high case loads being one of those characteristics or maybes unsupported peer interactions and supervision or any of those things that add up to a sense of disillusionment disappointment one's idealism becomes very damaged and people are not functioning at their best. Rust out is more the individual still is operating with integrity still doing adequate work maybe not at their best level but they've lost some of their spark and their vigor and or joy about the work and the beginning of the work. So they're kind of rusting out because they don't have sufficient either self care or organizational care. Now those are all different and secondary trauma and compassion fatigue which by the way are pretty much used interchangeably and they would be represented by those symptoms that I just mentioned vicarious trauma includes all of the above in terms of secondary compassion fatigue.

[00:15:14] But it goes a step further and is an indication that a person's world view one how one sees the world the lenses by which one understands reality can actually be shaken that can be a psychological and spiritual territory. Maybe one becomes vicarious trauma takes on a kind of cynicism or a lack of trust and the reality that they had when they entered the field. So it moves on a somewhat deeper or more global sense of awareness and change that awareness in terms of vicarious trauma in the film. I believe that Dr. Bloom Sandra Bloom talked a bit about the

cumulative effect that can occur of so much loss that many of these caregivers obviously witness over time. And she actually discussed a bit about the biology of it all if you will on the neuron systems. Any thoughts Rodney or Vek about some of what Dr. Bloom discussed in the film. I can say that the thing that I was struck by was in speaking of what you're saying is that there is a clear biological effect on us when we experience trauma.

[00:16:32] I think that one of our goals with the film was as Vek said not only to educate the public but also change the stigma around anything that has to do with emotional or mental challenges or diagnoses or whatever you want to call them and just having Saenger Bloom they're really making that connection between something that happens and they're really being that's a measurable physical tangible change in how the body is operating and functioning is I think a step toward both the professionals and the public to have a greater understanding of this kind of that this stuff is real that the person is not weak or damaged in some way that this stuff is really needs our attention too. Rodney thanks just a couple comments. Vic I too have been working in the field for a long time in my experience too is that this isn't hasn't been something that certainly I was trained about when I first started out even paying attention to. And certainly as I look through my years I can take note of different points in time when there was some buffering effects that were helpful and then other times when I may not have been in such a great spot. With that being said in the film you do talk about something called an emotional safety plan. Can you talk more about. What does that mean in emotional safety plan. Let me speak to that but also to your point just before that secondary trauma can happen through a cumulative effect that is perhaps the social worker is coping quite well with the first three four or five incidences. That one deals with say in a given month. But there is a certain threshold that the individual social worker may have. It's like a tipping point it's like you can handle so much emotional exposure and it may be too much. If you're not getting the nurture and support and rest and boundaries and self care all those other things which I think we'll probably be talking about. But you can also experience secondary trauma suddenly around one horrible situation. It may not be a cumulative it may be the particular trauma that you are exposed to touches you in such a singular powerful way. Now all of that is curative and can be resolved.

[00:19:08] One is bare of it now. The emotional safety plan is a term that Senator Bloem uses a lot in the context of the sanctuary model. And each person who is in such an atmosphere with sanctuary model has been used has their own emotional safety plan and it varies from individual to individual. And one thinks about develops a plan that has at least five components at least five ways that I can calm myself down if I become overly stressed agitated. You know I need to bring myself back to the owner of peacefulness where I have my best attention where I'm truly present with my client and with others where I'm not distracted. So if we're really reading ourselves and we realize that we're really stressed by a particular situation what do we need to do. Now for some people it may be going that listening to a song on the radio or on one's iPod for somebody else it might be saying a prayer for someone else it may be stepping outside and taking a walk in the park somebody else might simply need to go get a drink of water or make a friendly phone call or maybe some combination of that. So the idea the emotional safety plan is to know really intentionally what that is and to follow it.

[00:20:42] And the sanctuary model is my I haven't actually been in such an organization but it's from our documentation of the individuals actually write that down and carry around a card that you can stick in your pocket you pull it out and you say oh my goodness I'm really stressed right now which of these things do I need to do that I've identified ahead of time that will help me come to a calm place again. Well said Ronnie any any added thoughts again as you listen to folks talk in the film and certainly being exposed to many folks in your own life in terms of your own field when it comes to the idea of self care. What are your thoughts about that regarding this issue of caregiving. I think it's so critical. And again in figuring out how to put the film together one of the things that Vick and I were very adamant about is that that we would show the successes show people who are

taking care of themselves and how some institutions have implemented it. And every time I see the film with a group of people the one thing I'm always struck by is the firefighters and the first responders session because particularly as they start the guy who's running the session starts out saying this used to happen at the firehouse we all sit around and talk to each other. Now orebodies on their phone and they don't talk and I will give it away. But there's some pretty amazing stories that they share with each other and the impact that it has on them. I think that having a way of taking care of yourself emotionally are critical to surviving in the modern era and particularly if your caregiver is even more important to having these plans and even extending it to things like yoga and meditation and massage. I know some people may think these are things that only you can only do if you're wealthy or if you're have a lot of free time.

[00:22:37] But I would make the argument that it's part of doing the job that if you're not on a plan to have some kind of regular self care self maintenance that you're going to end up just like a car doesn't get maintenance you're going to crash and burn and fall apart. Brand named it causes me to think about hearing you say that it reminds me of it's almost the possibility of two different levels certainly ourselves but also organizations businesses agencies depending on the routine and what they put into place structurally they themselves could allow for self care to be more fluent within the agency or organization. Yes yeah definitely. And as we show in the film the agencies that do use particularly the Tribune's model they are having great success and being able to deal with some of the issues that arise from secondary trauma. I'm really glad that Rodney made that point because we wanted the film and I think we've succeeded in this area. We wanted it to not just be a presentation of sort of the dark stressful side of doing the work but we wanted to illustrate how self care is implemented by the carryovers as they figure out these ways to enjoy life and to balance their lives with work and play whether it's gardening or yoga or hiking or whatever it is spend the time with your pet your spiritual practice. But the other level there that is so important is the organization's commitment to caring for its staff. And I think sometimes we have created another burden for the caregiver the professional in the same boat. All you gotta do is just take care of yourself.

[00:24:34] So they're wearing that on their shoulders too as it was their total responsibility. What we're discovering is that it really is a responsibility of the organization to assist in this matter. And the research shows that peer support is the key because peers get it. Peers understand what each other are experiencing and a way that people on the outside including frequently members of one's own family cannot grasp or can't grasp the same level so in the film we show not only the self care examples some of which Romney pointed to but also for different types of organizational structures. One of those is the stress First Aid program of the Philadelphia Fire Department which is peer oriented is looking out for your peer who is behaving out of character after an incident is not himself or herself who needs an informal outreach as to how you're doing and then bringing that back into a group process. The sanctuary motto we feature at Wordsworth a child welfare agency and how the individuals there on it are debriefing. We get to see that in action. We have a short segment of a seminar that occurs. It's led by a social worker named Laura Raczek and that seminars call when helping hurts. A day of healing for the helping professional so it's a retreat. It's getting away out in the country to a retreat center and intentionally providing care to each other as peers and then the fourth example of the film is looking at the hospice setting and we see the hospice team in their weekly rounds where they as part of their review of cases at the end of it.

[00:26:35] Some of the most progressive ones in fact many of them are taking a period of silence of meditation sometimes with candlelight an opportunity to honor the memory of the patients who died that week. I mean imagine you're on a hospice team and there are eight or 10 clients you know your team is taken care of. That may have died in a week or ten days. Not just going on with the one's workers. Everything's the same as stopping to honor those clients and their families. They're also honoring each other's team members being able to say to your team member it meant so much when you did this or that. I know this was really hard for you when you did that or ways that one

provides within the team role a sense of support. And then one can carry on. And we're finding that these types of modalities are being experimented with a number of fields. I've been learning a great deal about the medical field for example. One of the members of our advisory board a retired doctor named Don Friedman is aware of and trying to promote at Jefferson Hospital a thing called the pause an emergency medical teams come together when there was a code call and they rush of course to the scene and they try really really hard to revive that person and you have you know all manner of specialists that come immediately to that rescue. Well only 8 percent of those Kodie experiences succeed in keeping the person alive. And one of the things that some hospitals are now doing is that the teen stops. It's called the.

[00:28:18] And they take a moment of silence and they just acknowledge the death of that individual and they acknowledge the great effort that they've all put into this tent whether it's successful or not. And then they go on with their days work. So it's not it's not real time consuming but it's a way of being mindful of the moment and taking a breath and pausing to pause. You know in the film I think I remember the term compassion satisfaction was used. Is that a bit about what we're talking about. Could be some resulting pieces of when we are able to do better self care if you will or we're taking pause and noticing. Can you speak to the compassion satisfaction piece. Yes. Well that term was coined by Beth Hudnall Stumm and it is that sense of meaning and joy that the work gives to the caregiver its sense of purpose and accomplishment. It's the reason one went into this field in the first place and maybe that it's gotten compromised over time. So compassion satisfaction is getting back in touch with those qualities of the job in very specific ways. I've done a lot of training over the years in social work and I like to use positive cases. What made this case work given all the extraordinary odds that were perhaps against the success and the achievement in a particular case where all the factors and being able to focus on that I think are so important we have this thing and our broader culture about will learn from your mistakes when there's something to be said for that.

[00:30:12] But I think there's also a lot to be said for learn from one's successes take time to reflect on that and what gave you a sense of accomplishment and of appreciation even if something did turn exactly the way you wanted it to. Which is pretty much usually are really the case. How did it turn out. Perhaps in very positive ways. So yes I think that's what we mean by compassion satisfaction. It's powerful. I once was shared with me from the solution focused work that a phrase of what we notice gets bigger and that's a bit of what I hear you're talking about but we're focused on matters. Yes. Yes. And I think mindfulness and meditation are contemporary skills and practices which are so relevant in this particular conversation. Rodney you might want to mention how beautiful that was done at the Film Festival. I recently became a Unitarian and universal Unitarian. That's the church that my girlfriend and I go to and wellsprings. Reverend Ken Beldon is. He studied the mindful meditation that Jefferson has not has a program in teaching or training. It's used throughout the whole our services and everything. So we had a screening of caregivers along with a film called Paper Tigers which looks at the effect of trauma on youth over a lifetime. And I thought that showing both films back to back would be traumatic in itself. So I asked Refco to come and just do a mindful meditation five minute meditation in between the two films and it was immensely powerful. Everybody was there appreciated and it really helped set the tone going forward.

[00:32:07] Right after that we had our Q and A and a little break in in the next film but I think it would go a lot of comments from people in the audience about how powerful that was for them to be able to have a moment of mindful reflection and I would add to that that it seems like so much of our contemporary life even for non caregivers is almost like living in tribes we're always living in crisis and the need for to clear our mind and just sit in the moment is so valuable and important and it almost seems funny in a way because 200 years ago people didn't know how to live in the moment or so you know because you had to do what you had to deal with that moment you need to focus on it. And we now have this luxury that our minds can race into all sorts of things we can

multitask but it doesn't suck for our bodies. It's not good for us. And then add on that practically caregivers who have to go into treatment on a regular basis have to go when the crisis definitely could use these techniques to not only have a better life but also continue doing good work. One of the big things that I often talk about as we were putting the film together is that the reason for this film for the general public is that at some point and time every individual will need help from one of these types of caregivers and who do you want to show up when that care come. Do you want the crazy stressed out person suffering from secondary from our passion for tea. Or do you want the centred concern ready to be president caregiver. Well the work that the two of you have done in terms of bringing such real topics and real concern.

[00:33:55] I would say that is out there around making sure that we can be more well I really appreciate and I know others that are aware of your film appreciate the work that you did to put this together. Is there anything that I haven't asked either of you that you want to be sure that our listeners are aware of. I would say the coproducer of the film people are interested in a screening. They can certainly go to our Web site and there's places there where they can request a screening of the film or purchase the educational version of the film as well as Alexander press also is carrying our film. And if you are looking for a theatrical screening in your area you'd like to set one up the organisation called Tugg can help you do that. That information will all be on our website and if you have some thoughts or comments after you see the film please read them on our Facebook page and Vek our website is caregiver's film dot com and caregiver's Facebook dot com I believe that figure is full and yet leave us some comments. Tell us your stories and take care of yourself. The only thing I would add is that that last phrase around these stories the film is really driven by stories and we're very interested in people's stories and we encourage the professional caregivers to find outlets for those stories when it's just stuffed down in side one's psyche. It sits there and it can do a certain degree of damage. We have presented the film in workshops where people will forget to tell their story. They feel that they're not trusting atmosphere which we appreciate when they tell their story.

[00:35:47] It sounds like it happened yesterday but it actually happened 20 years ago and that's because it's been sitting there festering. And they never really talked about it with a trusted peer or professional or someone that they can really release that to so we encourage people to find a setting where they feel comfortable sharing their stories. And of course in many ways to do that whether it's in groups or one to or writing about it journaling about it or sharing it with us and what people are already sharing with the world they can be very therapeutic and healing to do that. Well thank you. Vic, Rodney I know that school of social work appreciates your time and certainly I do. In terms of taking the time to share with us all what it is that you're doing and the passion that you have for this work again thank you. Thank you. Thanks you've been listening to Vic Compher and Rodney Whittenberg discuss the passion and pain of professional caregivers on social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.