

## Episode 214 - Nicole Clark: Social Work Entrepreneurship

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.inSocialWork.org](http://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 Buffalo. The late Tim Russert a long term host of NBC's Meet the Press almost never stopped talking about his Buffalo roots. An exhibit of his NBC office is now taken up permanent residence at Buffalo's history museum. Tim's affection for Western New York is clearly apparent in his office which is filled with Buffalo memorabilia and probably way too many pieces related to his beloved Buffalo Bills. If you're a news junkie you get all the benefits of the exhibit and an experience of an incredibly beautiful building that was built for the Panamerican Exposition that Buffalo hosted in 1991. I'm Peter Sobota. Social workers have many paths to continue their professional development following the completion of their graduate education. Many follow a kind of ladder model moving up through agencies into supervisory and administrative positions while others choose a more nontraditional path. In this episode our guest Nicole Clark LMSW describes her journey from agency practitioner to a self-employed independent consulting practice. Ms Clark discusses how she embraced the entrepreneurial spirit moved forward and eventually made a headlong leap into beginning her own business. She speaks with experience about barriers and risks that she perceived and that threaten the security that many professionals experience in agency based practice. Ms Clark offers advice based on her reticence to strike out on her own and what she did to overcome it. She describes the role of passion in entrepreneurship and how she utilized technology. The importance of mentors and other practical recommendations that she found helpful in her successful launch. Ms Clark highlights the benefits for social workers and self employment and entrepreneurship and shares her perceived best practices in this endeavor. Finally Ms Clark describes her own passion and primary focus of her practice, the reproductive justice framework. Nicole Clark LMSW is a licensed social worker independent consultant and reproductive justice activist who uses the RJ framework with nonprofits government agencies and community groups. Nicole Clark was interviewed in January of 2017 by our own Connor Walters an MSW Ph.D. student here at the School of Social Work.

[00:03:10] I'm Connor Walters a Ph.D. student at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Here to talk with me about Reproductive Justice entrepreneurship and the independent consulting business is Nicole Clark. Nicole thanks for joining us today.

[00:03:22] Thank you.

[00:03:23] So to start tell us a little bit about your business and the structure of the services as you offer and the clients you tend to work with.

[00:03:30] My business began in 2013 when I finalized my business structure paperwork. But I would say that it began back in 2011 really initially as a blog. I started blogging a little bit about feminism reproductive justice and then eventually I started to blog a little bit more about program than any evaluation and social work in general. It was initially a passion project that I had to follow. I was working full time with an organization here in New York City called housing work. I had been with them for about five and a half years before I left. Back in May 2016 to do my business consulting full time my business structure is I work for myself my main employee one person right now and I offer services that focus on reproductive justice program design and programming evaluation and so my clients are a mixed bag of nonprofit community organizations and government agencies who primarily provide services for women. Girls, women, girls of color and they also are interested in the reproductive justice framework. So what I've been doing with them

for the past two and a half years is helping them to design and evaluate the programs and services that they offer all women and girls of color as they relate to the reproductive justice framework.

[00:05:10] Could you tell us a little bit more about what the reproductive justice framework is for people who might not study that particular area of social work.

[00:05:18] Yes. I was introduced to the reproductive justice framework back in 2003 when I was an undergraduate student in Spelman College in Atlanta Georgia and what reproductive Justice is an intersectional theory that emerges from the experiences of black women and women of color who have multiple community experiences context set of reproductive oppression is based on the understanding that race class gender and sexual identity can often impact how we feel about various health services. So I would consider it more of a holistic approach that links sexuality health and human right to social justice and a place abortion and respect of health issues within a larger context. The well-being and health the Women Family and Community. To tie in to what we typically hear about reproductive health we would have the right to health is more on a micro level. If you think about it in terms of social work practice. So reproductive health, you're meeting with your provider one on one and they are educating you many different services that they provide with services that you will have as well. Reproductive rights is More on the line of policy change and so reproductive justice, in comparison it's more of a community organizing holistic perspective that brings about the different communities men women and girls and women of color in general to fight more repressive oppression and to recognize the different ways that racism sexism and classism and different types of gender identity impact how we act and as recipients of health care services.

[00:07:15] Thank you. See that is the Columbia University School of Social Work with a focus in advanced general practice and contemporary issues in 2010. Tell us more about general practice and your decision on choosing this path to social work .

[00:07:31] Well initially when I entered social work school my plan was to become a clinical social worker. So preparing my work focused more on a clinical perspective I wanted to have my own private practice. At that time I wasn't really sure if I wanted to focus more on mental health or how or focused still reproductive the health rights and justice work. But I was introduced to the advanced journalist and programming focus at Columbia and I thought that spoke better to me comparison to the other bill which were clinical policy and administration because I felt that journalists practice. It allows for you to You still have the clinical perspective that at the same time it allows you to focus on a programmatic respective of agency or programs and organizations such as strategic planning evaluation and things of that nature. So I think with generalist social work it focuses on individuals and communities within their social context. And it really lends itself very well to just every bit of reproductive justice framework in general because it uses a variety of assessment and planning and intervention skills. And one way that I've been able to become more original is practice social work over a year. It can get as much as I can do everywhere from just that framework and all go into program design. So I think it's the more well-rounded version of social work. I'd love to talk to social work students about the different ways that we can do social work.

[00:09:18] In your time being in the social work field since 2010 How did you go from micro level social work to running an independent consulting business.

[00:09:25] So I was with my organization housing work which is a nonprofit to be here in York City. That's been around for over 20 years. And their primary focus is on ending the dual crisis homelessness and HIV AIDS in New York City. It was the first job that I had when I graduated from Columbia and my primary focus was on direct practice and case management. When I first started I had a caseload of about I would say a little under 40. The majority of them at the time were living with HIV or AIDS. Many of them were having issues with housing. But then throughout the

years I was starting to develop more and more of a passion for social justice issue. And reproductive justice in particular and I never thought that I would be in a position where I am now as a one person business. Entrepreneurship was never something that I consider because I think like for most people we're socialized who we're conditioned to go to school find a job and get that job for X amount of years and then retire. But entrepreneurship is always considered something that is more risky and so outside of just thinking more about entrepreneurship. I started to develop and be presented with an opportunity where I could do workshops that focused on the reproductive justice framework and also do panel presentations and presentations not only in New York City but across the country and people were starting to ask me to come to them to do workshops and pound sessions and speaking engagements and things like that so would start to think more about how I could leverage that. But again I wasn't really thinking moving away from my job because my job presented a lot of structure and a lot of security for me. So it wasn't until towards the latter part of 2015 that I started to think more about leaving my job and transitioning into full time consulting work because I was starting to come across people who were in business for themselves hearing about what they considered the pros and cons entrepreneurship and I started to think well maybe this is something that I could do because there were a lot of people who are very interested in the reproductive justice framework program design and curriculum development and just evaluation work in general at the beginning of 2016. I made a decision that I was going to leave my job in May of 2016 to go into my consulting full time on June 1st. So I submitted my notice to my supervisor in March of 2016 and I stayed on my job until May 31 of 2016 to allow for my provider to find someone to replace me and give me time to train that person and I left on May 31 2016. And I started full time on June 1st.

[00:12:48] Can you talk more about those risks that you may have seen involved in leaving the traditional social work setting to become an entrepreneur. What advice would you give students who are interested in taking an unconventional approach to social work whether that's entrepreneurship or something else that might be risky.

[00:13:06] So I think in general there's a lot of perceived risk in leaving what you consider to be security and moving on to something that may be considered more of an unknown more of a risk that way. Some advice that I would give to those who are students and off of those are professionals who are wanting to either leave their job either going in to business for themselves full time or even stay at their job full time or part time but do something a little bit more on the side. One piece of advice that I have is to identify your value positioning and what I mean by that. Identify what it is that you're passionate about and that if you could do it for the rest of your life that is the thing that you will want to do. One way to identify what that is. Blogging blogging was very instrumental in me making the decision to go into my business for a time because it allowed me to kind of identify what my voice is out in the world in the context of social work and reproductive justice and just program design and evaluation and me blogging on a pretty consistent basis. I've been able to share my perspective. On the things I care about like social work and entrepreneurship reproductive justice feminism and things like that. And to be known for those things. And that's how I've gotten a lot of work terms of my clientele because people know me based on my blog. So I definitely would say identify what your value positioning is what skills and expertise that you want to share with the world and find a way to share those things whether that's blogging or simply posting on social media find a way to identify what your value positioning is. another piece of advice that I will share is to identify who your mentors and your peers are. They can definitely be people that you meet in person or that people that you meet online and have it be a mixture of people who are on the same level as you are in terms of your skills and your expertise. Also don't be afraid to find mentors and peers who have been in consulting or transitioning with entrepreneurship and been in it for a much longer time to you because they're able to kind of help you along with recognizing what potential pitfalls are or giving you different tools and tips and advice on how to run a business. They can give you really really great practical advice on just being an entrepreneur and identifying different ways

that you can pick your business and just being overall support for you so definitely figure out who your mentors are and your peers and be connect to them as much as possible. Another piece of advice I would share is that that line I gave myself May 31 2016 even though I have been thinking about it for a few years now. And even though it gave me a little anxiety to know that May 31 date was approaching it excited me enough to want to make it happen. So I was able to get up as much quiet work as much as possible so that I felt comfortable leaving my job on May 31 to go into business for myself into first and last piece advice that I will share is to always stay a student. Whether it's going to conference is attending webinars reading book reading blog post or even listening to different types of podcast always make sure that you're staying up to date on what you want. You develop your business then so I always make sure that I'm doing a lot of webinars and training and just connecting with people who are in the field and another piece of advice and I'm actually thinking about right now is probably one of the bigger risk that if you don't have this with your business it may present a lot of challenges for you. But I think overall that number one thing is she find a way to maintain some form of structure. I think when we're in school and when we are at our day jobs it provides us with a lot of structures. For example if we know that we have class we have to be to work at 9 o'clock. We know that we have to get up at a certain time. We are to leave at a certain time get there at a certain time. We may have to go to classes or meetings and everything is revolved around that and it's given to us in the form of structure and one of the lessons that I've been learning as I've been in my business for time for a few months now is that maintaining structure is more of a mental thing that is the physical thing. It's a lot easier to submit a resignation. The physical part of submitting a resignation and leaving your job that's very easy. But when it comes to maintaining a structure for yourself don't have a boss to tell you what to do anymore. You don't have professors to tell you what to do anymore you have to be self-determined and have developed a particular type of structure for yourself. If you're not an early morning person then work late evening may work best be you figure out a way that works best structured for you. I tend to be an early riser so I can be up around 6:00 a.m. on most days and I try to work up until 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. but allows me to have the afternoon myself even to go along with that. Make sure that you give yourself a cut off time I think when you get really excited about different things that we're working on. we find ourselves working on it 24 hours a day seven days a week but it's very important to take some time away from what you're doing so that it allows you to come back and start fresh. So those are some advice I would give to students and professional social workers who are interested in self-employment.

[00:19:30] All right thank you so much for that advice. What do you think are the benefits of self employment in this field. Why should more social workers consider it.

[00:19:39] I think when we think about social workers and entrepreneurship is typically within the context of clinical practice. We hear a lot about social workers who have their own private practices and they do one to one client work and have a variety of field work. But I think it allows us to think more expansively. But even if you have a social worker who isn't interested in clinical social work you can always find a way or develop that way to have the entrepreneurial spirit whether it's within meso social work or also with macro social work. And there are lots of different ways that you can be an entrepreneur having client who you're meeting with them one on one or you can identify yourself as a public speaker who likes to go around and give keynote address or being too large and small non profit and things like that. And I also think that with entrepreneurship it allows social workers to develop what they really are passionate about. If you're someone who is passionate about clinical social work within the context of working with you you can identify yourself as an expert in that field. Don't necessarily have to be working for someone even though there are a lot of people who go into entrepreneurship when they were initially working for someone and they start to develop a name. And there are a lot of social workers who even though they are employed under someone they still have an expertise whether that they want TV to speak about it or they hold on to different podcasts or the go different conferences speaking he notes and things like that. So

entrepreneurship is pretty much what you make it there. In my opinion no right or wrong always do it. And I'm very excited. I've made this leap for myself and I love to speak to different social work professionals and also of students who are interested in entrepreneurship.

[00:21:45] Wow. Sounds like for you this is really about finding something you love and finding a way can that you're sure you're able to do that as much as possible in your career.

[00:21:54] Right. Oh make sure that it's something that is sustainable not only financially for yourself but also for the people that you are working for.

[00:22:04] On the topic of sustainability and other things what do you consider best practices in transitioning into self-employment for social workers. What if a social worker prefers in continuing part time employment but is interested in consulting opportunities for example on the side what advice can you give.

[00:22:19] I think the biggest piece of advice that I would give is determine if you want to leave your job and then find out what you want to do or to find out what you want to do while you're still working for someone else either full time or part time. In fact what I did and I found that they was the most beneficial for me is that I worked with my agency for five and a half year but I was really starting to build up my business on the side and I used my paid vacation days. Early morning and late in the hour for two week an hour to develop my business I went out meaning with my clients I would either meet with them on my paid off days and a lot of my vacation days. I figure Within the last year of my job were dedicated to meeting with my consulting client I also used those hours to go to conference to do workshops and things like that so I was able to gain that expertise. Outside of blogging and social media and people were starting to contact me a little bit more wanting me to do more client work with them and then it got to a point where the work that my business was starting to obtain was starting to overshadow the work that I was doing at my job. So it got to a point where it became physically difficult to do both at the same time and to laugh when I made the decision to transition from being an employee to being in self employment. And one thing that I mentioned that earlier was around maintaining structure is definitely definitely crucial to develop a structure for yourself where you can work on the things that you're passionate about work with your clients at the same time but also allow you to develop a level of discipline. I think a lot of time when we leave a job you want to do away with everything that reminded us being in a 9 to 5. You don't like having someone micromanaging and things like that we don't want anyone to identify our own structure for us. But I've found within the last or seven months or so that having a structure was very important in me becoming more successful in starting everything up and also deciding if you want to work at home or to work in a coworking space or a coffee house or a library. Some people tend to be more productive when they're around other people and there are people who are still more productive when they are working from home and I've found for myself that it's little mixture of both. Even though I consider myself an introvert. I love working from home. I'll like being around other people who may not be doing the same things that I'm doing but they're doing their thing in a way that is productive and it also motivates me to be productive as well.

[00:25:28] So let's transition in to talking about your business specifically your consulting business focuses on three key areas. Reproductive justice program design and program evaluation. How can social work be used to impact in these three areas.

[00:25:43] Outside of my consulting business. I am in advisory committee member for social workers for reproductive justice and so my help along with nothing other professional social workers and social work students we are developing ways to bring their reproductive justice framework to more social work student. And so within my business I do a lot of reproductive justice one on one workshops that they were organizations who were maybe familiar with the

framework but they may be having some difficulties in explaining what the framework is to not only their staff members but also to the people that they provide programs and services for in addition to that would be program design my program design focuses on how social workers and Nonprofit Professionals design programs and services for individuals and communities and the last piece is program evaluation where you're identifying what went well within a program and what things can be implemented to improve upon the program. And so social work can be used to impact these three areas even though we are more considered micro mezo or macro. I always try to beat to Typically social work student and identifying ways that even though they are clinical social work student always maintaining that social justice element to what they do. And so with me identifying or focusing on the work of a justice program design and program evaluation always makes sure that there is a social justice element to what I do. But even though I'm working directly with clients I'm trying to challenge them in a way where they can raise their voices for women and girls of color whether it's in the way that they design their program in ways that they evaluate their program and also to promote the reproductive justice framework in general.

[00:27:52] All right. What tools and resources have been useful to you. While growing and expanding your consulting business.

[00:27:59] So I actually have a list of resources that I've been using over the last year that found to be very useful. The first one is google calendar which is a free service by Google. I love it. I love how I can see my go to at a glance. I'll go enjoy how I can connect both my personal calendar as well as my business calendar and that I'm not overlapping different types of things that I have to do either on a personal level and also for my client. boomerang by gmail is a plug in through e-mail where you can actually schedule email to be sent out at a certain time and that's been very helpful for me because even if I decide to work late at night I don't want to be emailing my clients late at night so I can type up this e-mail and get it to be sent out the next day at 9pm. So that's been a really good fall for me as well. Another tool that I like using it called freshbooks. And it's the cloud accounting program where I'm able to bill my client and also to see how everything is going with me I naturally give alert to my client on if there's a bill that needs to be paid. And also allows me to see what I'm spending my money on in my business. MailChimp is a really good tool as well. A e-mail service system where you're able to email newsletters and announcements to people who subscribe to your list. I believe the way that MailChimp works is it's a free service until you get to a certain number of e-mail subscribers I believe it's around a 1000 or 2000 subscribers. And so for a lot of people just starting out as you start to build up your business and also build up your e-mail MailChimp is really great that you don't have to pay for it at the very beginning and you start to get more people to sign up for your e-mail. I also use WordPress for transitioning my blog to WordPress. I was using Tumblr which was fine but I noticed that a lot of functionality that I needed for my business I wasn't able to get that through Tumblr. So I transitioned my blog from Tumblr to WordPress. In November of 2015 and I was able to do that through my web hosting which is BlueHost. They have support services that allow for you to transition your blog from another platform to WordPress. And they also provide one to one WordPress support. So I really really like that as well. Another thing that has been very useful related to blogging and social media is a Web site called Canva and it allows users to create different types of images. You can create an image for your blog post. You can create images for your social media whether with the Facebook cover or Twitter cover or Instagram as well. I've been able to use those who post images that I like from my blog post so that people can connect to those as well. Those are just a few of are services that I like. In addition to survey monkey and those types of services I also like the typeform and one reason why I like typeform is that it's more aesthetically pleasing compared to different types of survey programs. And I recently had a survey on my Web site where I was gaining some feedback on a project that I'm going to be working on in the beginning of 2017 and I actually got a lot of people responding back saying that they really enjoyed the survey because it seemed to be kind of embedded into my Web site and it looked very pleasing. So I liked typeform while other tools and

resources that I've been using to grow and expand my business.

[00:32:38] So what's next for you in the business.

[00:32:39] My top priority for 2017 is on the development of a tool kit. Right now it is going to be a three part training program. They're going to combine the reproductive justice program design and programming evaluation for nonprofit community organizations and government agencies that one who start developing and improving programs and services that they provide within the reproductive justice framework. And one of the reasons why I decided to come up with this toolkit was because I noticed that with many of my client that we're doing reproductive justice in the work but they were having some problem in explaining the framework to the people that they work with and also to the people that they provide programs and services for and sometimes even if they were very proficient in reproductive justice they may be lacking the skills and program design or programming. You wish you throughout the past year and a half I've noticed that the three have been pretty siloed for me in terms of different clients and bringing in my practice and many of them they may have hired me for example to do a reproductive justice one to one training but then they'll find out more about the program design than I do and also the program evaluation work that I do. So instead of having things be more siloed for me I've decided to create this tool kit and training program so that organization can work on all three at the same time to develop a more well-rounded way of viewing to achieve framework in how it connects into the program and services that they provide for their community. So I'm looking forward to that. Ideally I'm planning to have it done by April 2017. So that's my major project for this year.

[00:34:20] Is there anything else you want to touch on that we didn't get to.

[00:34:23] No I think that it. I'm just really excited to just share more about just reproductive justice in general and more about entrepreneurship. Like I that I really enjoy speaking about both particularly for social work students because I do tend to get a lot of e-mails from students whether they are at the bachelor's level or the masters level at the Ph.D. level they're interested in finding a way to make social work work for them and I'm really excited to add this piece to the podcast for students to consider.

[00:35:03] Absolutely, and I'm excited to have you. My name is Connor Walters from the University of Buffalo School Social Work. I've been talking with Nicole Clark, the business is Nicole Clark Consulting. Web site is [NicoleClarkConsulting.com](http://NicoleClarkConsulting.com). You'll be able to find contact information there. Thank you so much for talking with us Nicole.

[00:35:25] Thank you. Connor.

[00:35:26] You've been listening to Nicole Clark discuss social work entrepreneurship and in social work.

[00:35:40] 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 or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at [www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu](http://www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu). And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.