

inSocialWork Podcast Series – Politics (Yes, Politics) for Social Workers: A Guide for Affecting Change

Speaker 1 [00:00:03] And you quote my favorite political scientist, John Lennon, you say you've got a real solution. Well, you know, we'd all love to see the point from the university at Buffalo School of Social Work. Welcome to in social work. I'm Peter Sobota. Too good to have you on social work positions itself as the profession that promotes and strives for social justice and one that takes action on behalf of marginalized people and groups. Yet a significant number of practitioners work almost exclusively at the individual or micro level, frequently in clinical trials today and in social work. Our guest, Stephen Pimpare, talks with us about what lessons we as people working with marginalized populations can take away from our daily practice to call to action in advocacy for social change and enacting policies that improves the well-being of the people and places we serve. As you may have noticed, we've been living in times of extraordinary social and cultural upheaval. Times ripe for political action. But what prevents us from getting involved in activism and politics? Why is this so tough for many of us? Dr. Pimpare will offer us both conceptual and practical answers to these questions. He will talk about the effective use of power to impact larger systems. Tips for building knowledge, strategy, community and influence. Stephen Pimpare, Ph.D., is director of the Public Service, a nonprofit leadership program at the University of New Hampshire. The author of five books, including his latest Politics for Social Workers, A Practical Guide to Effecting Change and a nationally recognized expert on poverty, homelessness and U.S. social policy, is principal lecturer at the University of New Hampshire in Manchester, and his background includes academic appointments at Columbia, NYU Simmons University and the City University of New York.

Speaker 2 [00:02:13] Stephen Pimpare, welcome to in social work.

Speaker 3 [00:02:16] Thank you. Glad to be here.

Speaker 2 [00:02:17] Now I'm very biased here and I was all in on talking with you.

Speaker 4 [00:02:22] Man, I've got questions. So just to

Speaker 2 [00:02:25] kind of get us going. I actually think we might have somewhat similar backgrounds. I was a social work practitioner for about six years. I've spent the last twenty one now in academia, and I think you have a similar background as well. And I know I know this for a fact that I know that you have a lot of experience with practice and at street level experience focusing primarily on poverty and child welfare reform. And I know feeding communities and now and you've been working in academia as well. So we have a lot to talk about and especially the themes of your

Speaker 4 [00:03:06] book politics

Speaker 2 [00:03:07] for social workers. But first, I always wonder how people like us end up doing what we do before we get to the nuts and bolts of our conversation today. Could you take a little bit of time and just talk about how you came to the work that you do now?

Speaker 3 [00:03:26] Happy to. Let me try to tell the relatively abbreviated version because I write Origin stories are complicated, aren't they?

Speaker 2 [00:03:35] Mine was

Speaker 3 [00:03:36] right. How does one become who one becomes right?

Speaker 4 [00:03:39] So I live the

Speaker 3 [00:03:40] bulk of my adult life in New York City and found myself after a number of different occupations, working as a corporate paralegal for the Citibank Global Asset Management Division.

Speaker 2 [00:03:50] Oh, a traditional

Speaker 3 [00:03:52] social worker, obviously. Where else would one begin? And absolutely loathed the debt more than I have loathed any job that I have had in my life. And every time I

Speaker 4 [00:04:00] tried to quit, they threw more money at me. But one of

Speaker 3 [00:04:03] the lawyers I was working for at Citibank was president of the board of directors of an organization called Artists to End

Speaker 4 [00:04:09] Hunger, and I started

Speaker 3 [00:04:11] volunteering

Speaker 4 [00:04:12] for them, and they

Speaker 3 [00:04:13] were this little tiny, scrappy organization that was deeply connected to the art world and the

Speaker 4 [00:04:19] service world, and put

Speaker 3 [00:04:20] together exhibits mostly from living

Speaker 4 [00:04:23] artists around

Speaker 3 [00:04:25] themes usually focused on development and hunger and access to human rights and dignity.

Speaker 4 [00:04:32] Kinds of questions.

Speaker 3 [00:04:33] And then put them together and taught them around the world. And each host city was responsible for putting together an educational program to go along with the exhibits.

Speaker 4 [00:04:44] And then we

Speaker 3 [00:04:45] brought all of those artworks back to New York City, auctioned them off at Sotheby's and Christie's. And then that formed the basis of our operating foundation as how we made grants. And I came in and started volunteering and was eventually. Offered the executive director job of the organization after a while and took a 75 percent, 80 percent cut in pay in order to do that and have never looked back. Utterly transformative experience and I realize

Speaker 4 [00:05:17] that, oh, there are

Speaker 3 [00:05:18] things that I could do that would bring meaning to my life and not make me dread going off to work. So that led into more than a decade worth of work in a number of organizations throughout New York

Speaker 4 [00:05:33] City, mostly

Speaker 3 [00:05:34] working in soup kitchens, food pantries, emergency feeding programs in homeless shelters was part of a team that did some designing of job training programs with wraparound services for women with children living in shelters who had escaped abusive relationship. And during that work also wound up doing a bit

Speaker 4 [00:05:55] more than a bit of

Speaker 3 [00:05:56] advocacy work at the

Speaker 4 [00:05:57] city state

Speaker 3 [00:05:59] and eventually the national level. And this is how we get to how I became what I seem to be these days.

Speaker 2 [00:06:05] Well, you know, I mean, clearly, you've spent time in the real world, which is, I think, what I was alluding to. Go ahead. Please continue, sir.

Speaker 3 [00:06:12] So this was mid-nineties now.

Speaker 2 [00:06:15] Look, we're only in the 90s.

Speaker 4 [00:06:16] OK, here we go.

Speaker 3 [00:06:17] We're only in the 90s at this point. Not now believe he has short hair where we go from here. But this is the time, right? The national welfare reform debate was heating up, and I'm listening to this national discourse about low income women with children, right and who they are and why they are in the circumstances that they are in and how we should think of them and how public policy should

Speaker 4 [00:06:38] deal with them. And at

Speaker 3 [00:06:39] the same

Speaker 4 [00:06:40] time, spending my

Speaker 3 [00:06:41] days in literally some of the poorest community districts in the entire United

Speaker 4 [00:06:46] States working with

Speaker 3 [00:06:47] those same

Speaker 4 [00:06:48] people.

Speaker 2 [00:06:49] And there was no disconnect whatsoever, right?

Speaker 3 [00:06:51] Exactly right. It's I

Speaker 4 [00:06:53] literally did not

Speaker 3 [00:06:54] understand, right? In the most basic sense, it's like, how can this public and we're not talking, just media, right? This is members of

Speaker 4 [00:07:02] Congress senior

Speaker 3 [00:07:03] experts

Speaker 4 [00:07:04] supposedly right.

Speaker 3 [00:07:05] How could the way in which they talk about these people and

Speaker 4 [00:07:09] those issues be so

Speaker 3 [00:07:10] completely and utterly disconnected from the reality that I was seeing

Speaker 4 [00:07:15] every day that for

Speaker 3 [00:07:16] better or worse, is what sent me off to grad school in part in search of those kinds of answers, right? Because I really was struggling, I didn't understand how this could happen. So I went off to the City University of New York and worked with Frances Fox Piven as my advisor, who many listeners I hope very much will

Speaker 4 [00:07:33] know who was also

Speaker 3 [00:07:34] someone right who has

Speaker 4 [00:07:35] roots in both worlds,

Speaker 3 [00:07:37] right? Very much was was in the foreground with her husband, Richard glowered around great society programs and take some credit for the development of some of those

Speaker 4 [00:07:47] programs before then

Speaker 3 [00:07:48] going off to full time academia.

Speaker 4 [00:07:50] So like

Speaker 3 [00:07:51] to think that that she is someday the best version of myself and figuring

Speaker 4 [00:07:55] out a way to bridge that

Speaker 3 [00:07:57] gap between the work that we now do here in the

Speaker 4 [00:08:00] university and the really

Speaker 3 [00:08:02] equally important work that is going on on the ground in low income communities of color in

Speaker 4 [00:08:07] particular, and how we

Speaker 3 [00:08:09] find

Speaker 4 [00:08:09] ways to

Speaker 3 [00:08:10] move knowledge across both of those spaces.

Speaker 2 [00:08:13] Yeah. And this is why, you know, all of us on our little production team, we were really interested in talking with you

Speaker 4 [00:08:18] because, you know, your

Speaker 2 [00:08:19] story is in many ways similar to mine. And it's

Speaker 4 [00:08:23] almost like, this is like

Speaker 2 [00:08:24] the the defacto progression, especially for social workers, is that we and we'll probably talk about this later

Speaker 4 [00:08:31] in more detail. But it just

Speaker 2 [00:08:33] struck me while I was listening to your

Speaker 4 [00:08:35] story is that we

Speaker 2 [00:08:36] start off, you know, helping people one by one and actually and then you just realize that you could do that forever. Yeah. And then you slowly

Speaker 4 [00:08:46] begin to appreciate

Speaker 2 [00:08:48] larger systems and the environment and

Speaker 4 [00:08:51] so terrific

Speaker 2 [00:08:52] things. So are you ready to get to the topic at hand here?

Speaker 3 [00:08:55] I am. I feel like we need to do one disclaimer. I am not a social worker.

Speaker 2 [00:09:00] Wait, is that a dis? When did that become a disclaimer that

Speaker 3 [00:09:04] I don't want anyone to misunderstand? But I mean, I think it's important

Speaker 4 [00:09:08] is that my graduate degree

Speaker 3 [00:09:10] was in public policy and political science. Yeah. But because of my practical experience and because so much of my

Speaker 4 [00:09:17] original doctoral

Speaker 3 [00:09:18] research was literally nineteenth century poor relief

Speaker 4 [00:09:21] policies around the

Speaker 3 [00:09:22] founding of the social work profession and

Speaker 2 [00:09:25] you taught for many years in schools.

Speaker 3 [00:09:26] Very. Exactly right. I taught at NYU, I taught at Columbia, I taught at Hunter. I taught more recently

Speaker 4 [00:09:31] at Simmons and here at UNHCR.

Speaker 3 [00:09:34] I probably spent more time actually teaching social work students than I had undergraduate policy and political science.

Speaker 2 [00:09:40] We're glad to have you, Steven World.

Speaker 3 [00:09:41] Thank you. It's lovely to be here.

Speaker 2 [00:09:43] Yeah, that's terrific. Okay.

Speaker 3 [00:09:45] Much more of my people. But don't tell the political scientists that got it.

Speaker 2 [00:09:49] That so-called disclaimer aside,

Speaker 4 [00:09:52] we vetted you, Stephen. We employ the New

Speaker 2 [00:09:54] Yorker to do our vetting for us, and

Speaker 4 [00:09:56] at any rate, so social

Speaker 2 [00:09:58] work position. Is itself as the profession that promotes and strives for social justice and and that we especially take action with people and populations that are marginalized. That's kind of our mantra that's in our mission yet. And here comes the reality that you were referring to earlier. A significant number of us work almost exclusively at the individual or the micro level,

Speaker 4 [00:10:26] and often

Speaker 2 [00:10:27] in clinical roles. Yeah. So, you know, I'm a proud social worker. There are things that we do fantastic. But you know, I think we need to think critically about everything that we do. So given if everyone is buying what I said so far, what do you think prevents us from getting involved with activism and politics, you know, beyond voting

efforts not to disparage voting efforts and registration efforts, but on some level, that's kind of like the low hanging fruit

Speaker 3 [00:11:00] grossly

Speaker 4 [00:11:00] insufficient, necessary,

Speaker 3 [00:11:02] but insufficient.

Speaker 2 [00:11:03] Right? So why do you think it's so tough for us to do this?

Speaker 3 [00:11:07] You know, I think some of that is if we if you think back to the history of the profession itself, right, it's it's the progression still.

Speaker 4 [00:11:13] I just read

Speaker 3 [00:11:14] something literally today sort of singling out Jane Addams as the model for the profession, right? She was in many ways drummed out of the profession in her time, right. She was vilified. She was

Speaker 4 [00:11:26] ostracized.

Speaker 3 [00:11:27] The settlement house movement that we take so much pains to celebrate is essentially gone in all but name, right? So I think that there have been longstanding impediments to the kind of confrontational political work immersed in marginalized communities that we rhetorically celebrate, but often feel really uncomfortable with when confronted in the real world.

Speaker 4 [00:11:55] And I think that's a long standing challenge.

Speaker 3 [00:11:57] This is a very old debate, right?

Speaker 4 [00:11:59] And go back to sort of early

Speaker 3 [00:12:01] years of the profession and debating whether sort of the advent of Freud,

Speaker 4 [00:12:04] whether there's too much

Speaker 3 [00:12:05] psychology and not enough sociology in the profession. This is, I think, a constant strain throughout the profession as to what that balance is. I think some of it is the nature of the training

Speaker 4 [00:12:19] itself focuses on

Speaker 3 [00:12:21] the clinical. And as you say, that's super important word. I don't for a moment disparage

Speaker 4 [00:12:25] that really

Speaker 3 [00:12:26] important gifted clinical work that people are doing. But the danger of understanding social work interventions as clinical and individual is that you wind up

thinking of the people in front of you as having more power and control over the things that have gone wrong in their lives than they do if

Speaker 4 [00:12:50] we think that our

Speaker 3 [00:12:52] clinical intervention is the answer to people's problems. We wind up trying to fix

Speaker 4 [00:12:59] people instead

Speaker 3 [00:13:00] of focusing on fixing systems that box them often into what are utterly unworkable coroners right where they can't.

Speaker 2 [00:13:09] Yeah, man, that's a whole nother podcast. Yeah, I mean, obviously, people like Paul Kibel has been pretty. He wonders, you know, what's up with social workers? Are they interested in social

Speaker 4 [00:13:20] change or social

Speaker 2 [00:13:22] services? Leslie Margolin, you know, wrote under the cover of kindness, that was a humbling kind of text. You know, James McKnight, I think, was, you know, he thought social work had positioned itself as a profession and Alinsky wasn't too fond of social

Speaker 4 [00:13:39] workers, you know, well

Speaker 3 [00:13:40] respected. Courtney, obviously, was sort of the famous example and pivot and clawed themselves.

Speaker 4 [00:13:45] Yeah, right.

Speaker 3 [00:13:46] And you know, they were both at Columbia School of Social Work at the time wrote excoriating Lee about what they perceived to be the ways in which social workers and the profession got in the way of their efforts to mobilize poor and low income people in late 60s and early 70s in order to extract better services from government.

Speaker 2 [00:14:06] And then almost to kind of perpetuate the status quo rather than social change. So why does this happen? Is it that we don't know what to do? I'd hate to think that we don't care. That would be rough. Or are we just like too focused on other kinds of shiny objects?

Speaker 3 [00:14:25] You know, I think it may be all of the above and probably a dozen other things as well. I mean, I think in the crudest possible way, effective political work right at whatever level you're thinking about is, I think, harder. I mean, it's it's a lot of cat herding, right? And what sort of community organizing right is that identifying people who potentially could be participants in their own advocacy, finding ways to bring them together, finding democratic ways to identify the nature of problems in a community, then figuring out ways. You construct practicable solutions, figuring out where in the political system you need to direct your energy in which ways in order to get what kind of results on and on and on and the realization that

Speaker 4 [00:15:12] all

Speaker 3 [00:15:13] of that is hard and slow.

Speaker 2 [00:15:17] Yeah, glacial. That was the word that absolutely while you were talking, yeah, we don't have the attention span for that kind of work.

Speaker 3 [00:15:23] I mean, and most people don't write, it's not just social workers, right? It's like, that's super hard work that you've

Speaker 4 [00:15:28] got to be in for the

Speaker 3 [00:15:30] long haul. There's one other piece of this, and I think this goes back to my obviously fairly crude observations about the nature of clinical practice and how that shapes how we approach the world. But I think that so much of formal social work training, it's about persuasion, it's about empathy, it's about listening, right?

Speaker 4 [00:15:50] It's about building sort of one

Speaker 3 [00:15:51] on one or group to one human personal relationships, opening up space for persuasion and conversation. Politics is about

Speaker 4 [00:16:00] power, and it's about

Speaker 3 [00:16:01] conflict diametrically imposed in some

Speaker 4 [00:16:05] ways, right to

Speaker 3 [00:16:06] the ways that social workers think about how to be effective in the world.

Speaker 4 [00:16:12] And I think that's the

Speaker 3 [00:16:14] fundamental disconnect, right? And a lot of people have this problem. The failure to realize that political conflict is not bad. It is literally the essence of what politics is. It is the means by which

Speaker 4 [00:16:27] we understand

Speaker 3 [00:16:29] our different values and we compete in a public space for influence over the agenda that is

Speaker 4 [00:16:37] conflict. And it is often

Speaker 3 [00:16:39] a zero-sum game by when somebody else loses. Oh, gotcha. OK. Yeah. Not social working. Not super human. Right?

Speaker 2 [00:16:50] No, but but yes. Yes and no.

Speaker 4 [00:16:53] Right? So actually,

Speaker 2 [00:16:55] yeah, my question was like, what is it that we need to know about how politics, especially in the U.S., works and how the sausage making that policy

involves? And I think you've already alluded to that, obviously, you know, it's all about power. It is about heated discourse. Sometimes we seem to have lost the ability to do that without hating each other. Unfortunately, yeah. What else would you see as the necessary

Speaker 4 [00:17:23] need to know

Speaker 2 [00:17:24] for social workers who are going to dip their toe in or really dove in?

Speaker 3 [00:17:30] I mean, I would emphasize something I've already said, which is do not underestimate the difficulty of the challenge that you're being engaged in and how slow political and policymaking process typically is. I think part of what happens is people have sometimes naive and unrealistic expectations of how much change can happen and how quickly and wind up meeting the real world in all of its complexity.

Speaker 4 [00:17:56] Get frustrated,

Speaker 3 [00:17:57] get burnt out and move on to other things. Right.

Speaker 4 [00:17:59] So I think, you know, this

Speaker 3 [00:18:00] is not a recipe for being cynical. It is, I think, a recipe for

Speaker 4 [00:18:04] being super

Speaker 3 [00:18:06] critical and super strategic, right

Speaker 4 [00:18:08] understanding right city,

Speaker 3 [00:18:10] state and national level. How do those systems function and not in a superficial Schoolhouse Rock kind of right, right?

Speaker 4 [00:18:17] What is the research really

Speaker 3 [00:18:19] tell

Speaker 4 [00:18:19] us about what

Speaker 3 [00:18:20] we know of the machinations of these

Speaker 4 [00:18:22] systems?

Speaker 3 [00:18:23] Most people do know, or maybe they don't, that the U.S. political system at all levels is significantly more complicated than political systems in most other rich democracies. Right. So we've already got obstacles

Speaker 4 [00:18:34] baked into the system, the U.S. Constitution in my mind.

Speaker 3 [00:18:39] And I would argue in James Madison's mind as well was intentionally designed to frustrate the ability of even a determined majority to exert its will. Literally, that's the design of the system. So if you are finding that you are hitting walls, that you're frustrated that you can't make change, the system is working as intended. Congratulations, you've discovered it. The trick, then,

Speaker 4 [00:19:05] is to think again in

Speaker 3 [00:19:07] a super strategic fashion, right? Recognizing that every time is different, every location in

Speaker 4 [00:19:13] government is different.

Speaker 3 [00:19:14] Every policy issue is different.

Speaker 4 [00:19:16] And all of

Speaker 3 [00:19:16] those things interact in their own magical, frustrating ways. Right? Where is it that there is space for you and the group that you are working with it

Speaker 4 [00:19:28] to exert some

Speaker 3 [00:19:30] influence and push progress forward by a step or two or three? If you're really lucky and really

Speaker 4 [00:19:40] talented, I really do

Speaker 3 [00:19:41] think that it's impossible to overstate the necessity of that deep critical knowledge, the strategic thinking and the patience.

Speaker 2 [00:19:51] Yeah, man, I said like three light bulbs there.

Speaker 4 [00:19:54] So let me, if I could,

Speaker 2 [00:19:55] let me share an observation from my world.

Speaker 4 [00:19:59] Classes with students and when

Speaker 2 [00:20:01] we talk

Speaker 4 [00:20:02] about, you know, large

Speaker 2 [00:20:03] scale changes, social action, social

Speaker 4 [00:20:07] change and I

Speaker 2 [00:20:08] asked students, you know, how do they think about that? What's mysterious or familiar or attractive about that?

Speaker 4 [00:20:14] It's interesting.

Speaker 2 [00:20:15] They almost always usually go straight to the federal level.

Speaker 4 [00:20:20] It's like solve

Speaker 2 [00:20:21] poverty

Speaker 4 [00:20:22] at the federal level and

Speaker 2 [00:20:24] what I find myself making an argument for, and this is what I'd what do you want

Speaker 4 [00:20:28] to comment on? I kind of

Speaker 2 [00:20:29] try and tell them, Well, yeah, but doesn't that feel

Speaker 4 [00:20:33] overwhelming? And so I

Speaker 2 [00:20:34] end up making the argument for what is that famous? I think it was maybe Tip O'Neill or some kind of why politics is local. Yeah, yeah. That it's all got to start at the local level. Run for the school board. That's kind of where a lot of this stuff happens.

Speaker 4 [00:20:51] And, you know, not

Speaker 2 [00:20:52] to get too political here. I'm going to behave myself. But it does seem

Speaker 4 [00:20:56] that currently one of our political

Speaker 2 [00:20:58] parties understands this

Speaker 4 [00:21:00] quite well, and they have

Speaker 2 [00:21:01] been, you know, really pouring lots

Speaker 4 [00:21:04] of energy in the local

Speaker 2 [00:21:05] levels and magnet school boards. And I'm going to stop talking, what? What's your take on that?

Speaker 4 [00:21:11] I think that's all right. I think, you know, first

Speaker 3 [00:21:13] of all, sort of think historical context. If you look at sort of the rise of the

Speaker 4 [00:21:16] modern radical

Speaker 3 [00:21:18] revanchist

Speaker 4 [00:21:18] conservative movement, right? You got

Speaker 3 [00:21:20] to go back to

Speaker 4 [00:21:20] the 70s, right? Just sort of

Speaker 3 [00:21:22] since the founding of the Heritage Foundation and the reorganization of the Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable

Speaker 4 [00:21:28] literally reorganizing themselves. And we have

Speaker 3 [00:21:31] documents on this right. We literally have the papers.

Speaker 4 [00:21:33] We got memos

Speaker 3 [00:21:34] outlining three and four decades long

Speaker 4 [00:21:37] plans to retake.

Speaker 3 [00:21:39] They perceived that they'd lost control in the 60s to retake control

Speaker 4 [00:21:43] over government

Speaker 3 [00:21:44] and restore us to whatever imagined past they thought we should be restoring

Speaker 4 [00:21:48] ourselves to.

Speaker 3 [00:21:49] And that started at the local level, right? It started, as you said, at school boards, right? This is often

Speaker 4 [00:21:54] in many places super

Speaker 3 [00:21:56] low hanging fruit,

Speaker 4 [00:21:57] school board, zoning board library

Speaker 3 [00:22:00] boards, many, many of those positions, especially in smaller towns, and this varies from state

Speaker 4 [00:22:07] to state, are begging

Speaker 3 [00:22:08] people to step into those offices. And the right understood

Speaker 4 [00:22:14] that not

Speaker 3 [00:22:14] only are those places of power in their own

Speaker 4 [00:22:18] right.

Speaker 3 [00:22:19] Excellent training for the next step up the exact right? Yeah. So then, OK, that's great. You learn a little something about local government. Maybe you sit on the alder board in your city or town, if that's the way it organizes, right, you do that and you learn what's going on locally. Maybe there's a county commissioner office that opens up and you would step up from there. And then maybe there's a state

Speaker 4 [00:22:40] legislature seat that

Speaker 3 [00:22:41] you run for and probably lose the first time or maybe the second time, or

Speaker 4 [00:22:45] maybe the third time. And then you do

Speaker 3 [00:22:46] it again, right? And you move on to the state level and then maybe you do or do not, then move on to the federal level. But I think that thinking about local

Speaker 4 [00:22:57] issues is where

Speaker 3 [00:22:58] you have the greatest resources and the greatest knowledge.

Speaker 2 [00:23:01] You really do get a lot of practice. I see I work in Buffalo, but I live in a small town. I live in a rural area actually south of Buffalo. You know, when you run for local office, you actually talk to people who live in your community. If you know, if you campaign,

Speaker 4 [00:23:17] you know, and it's

Speaker 2 [00:23:18] amazing what you learn about a place that you've lived in for 25

Speaker 4 [00:23:22] years. Some of it's

Speaker 2 [00:23:23] confirmed, and some of it is like, Holy Man, where have I been? And then that becomes very eye-opening at larger levels. So you

Speaker 4 [00:23:30] learn not so

Speaker 2 [00:23:32] much how to talk to people, but how to listen in a very strategic

Speaker 4 [00:23:36] way, obviously.

Speaker 2 [00:23:37] And I'm a fan of, you know, fighting dirty. I'm, you know, I'm a fan, although

Speaker 4 [00:23:42] I don't think the Alinsky

Speaker 2 [00:23:43] model holds up in today's world. But I still

Speaker 4 [00:23:46] think, you know, that

Speaker 2 [00:23:47] playbook is still in quite the fashion. So, I mean, that's the old saying, right? If you don't have the financial capital, what you build is social capital that gets done what through relationships and at the local level.

Speaker 3 [00:24:02] Right. And if you, you know, go back to the national level, right? If you think about

Speaker 4 [00:24:04] these sort of momentous moments in which we

Speaker 3 [00:24:08] advance social, political and economic

Speaker 4 [00:24:10] rights right at the heart,

Speaker 3 [00:24:12] I would argue of each and every one of those is a mass movement of one kind or another. Is people gathering together out of anger or frustration or

Speaker 4 [00:24:21] disappointment and putting

Speaker 3 [00:24:23] pressure on that formal political institution. And I think that's part of the trick, too, is recognizing

Speaker 4 [00:24:29] that you need both of those things right. You need people

Speaker 3 [00:24:32] in the City Council or the state legislature or in Congress who are sympathetic

Speaker 4 [00:24:37] to your

Speaker 3 [00:24:38] ideas, your values, your policy

Speaker 4 [00:24:40] preferences. But then

Speaker 3 [00:24:42] you also need the people power

Speaker 4 [00:24:45] that forces them to do things

Speaker 3 [00:24:48] that maybe are hard or

Speaker 4 [00:24:49] uncomfortable so

Speaker 3 [00:24:51] that you deal, right? That sort of complexity that I was talking about

Speaker 4 [00:24:54] earlier, right? That's how we

Speaker 3 [00:24:55] overcome these complex systems is we break them.

Speaker 4 [00:24:59] In some ways, right, we break the norm, think

Speaker 3 [00:25:01] of the think of the 60s, they get the pandemic right, think of I was right that yeah, over night, things that we had been told for decades and decades and decades weren't impossible turned out not to be impossible at all.

Speaker 2 [00:25:16] And then when the pandemic waned a little bit. I'll let you finish that sentence.

Speaker 3 [00:25:23] So let me turn this into a positive lesson. Yeah, yeah. Let's go. Because I think there is one there and it's something that concerned me at the time. It is insufficient

Speaker 4 [00:25:34] to

Speaker 3 [00:25:35] show up, cause some noise, put some pressure on a system and then go back about your business. Go back. All right. You've got to be engaged in long term mobilization and organization. And there was not, in my mind, nearly enough of that for understandable reasons, right? I mean, we were in fact, in the midst of a pandemic

Speaker 4 [00:25:54] which hit right populations

Speaker 3 [00:25:56] that we all tend to

Speaker 4 [00:25:57] care about

Speaker 3 [00:25:57] exceptionally hard, right? So it was enough just to keep people healthy and alive. Nonetheless, there were, I think, lots of missed opportunities

Speaker 4 [00:26:06] there to fight

Speaker 3 [00:26:07] at the moment of policy making during the emergency to make more of those policies permanent, because that was the space that opened up for the extra normal policy making right. The sort of the events that come along that change all the normal relations, change, all the dynamics, change all the things we

Speaker 4 [00:26:25] know about the

Speaker 3 [00:26:26] normal policy making

Speaker 4 [00:26:28] process, right? Sort of crises like that.

Speaker 3 [00:26:30] Great Depression, another great

Speaker 4 [00:26:31] example, right? Sort of a

Speaker 3 [00:26:32] bust, all of

Speaker 4 [00:26:33] that apart. That's your moment.

Speaker 3 [00:26:35] And there were not enough people to my mind prepared to effectively seize that moment.

Speaker 2 [00:26:41] Yes, I apologize, but I want to go back. I was going to stop you then, but you were on

Speaker 4 [00:26:46] a roll for some

Speaker 2 [00:26:47] reason. It just really grabbed me. You said you need to force people to look at it and change. I don't know if you have more to say

Speaker 4 [00:26:56] about that, but you know

Speaker 2 [00:26:58] how that comes across, right? I mean, especially to a bunch of social

Speaker 4 [00:27:01] workers who are,

Speaker 2 [00:27:02] you know, enamored with self-determination and fairness and justice. Right?

Speaker 3 [00:27:08] OK. The people who I'm talking about forcing into action, there are people with power

Speaker 4 [00:27:13] and money, right?

Speaker 3 [00:27:13] Which is hugely important, right? Because I think we need to think about the power, really?

Speaker 2 [00:27:18] Absolutely right.

Speaker 3 [00:27:19] Yeah, right. Yeah. And I think that's legit influence where whereas that power directed downward is a dangerous and terrifying thing, right? But think about, you know, the thing that I spent most of my time working on is, is poverty, right? It's easy to solve poverty. It's like we've been so trained. It's like the Old Testament says the poor you shall always have with you. And it's intractable and it's difficult.

Speaker 4 [00:27:41] It's none of those things. Right?

Speaker 3 [00:27:43] Every other rich democracy on the

Speaker 4 [00:27:45] planet has

Speaker 3 [00:27:46] found a way to have radically lower poverty rates than we do. This is not a policy problem. It's just absolutely not a policy problem. This is not hard. It is absolutely a political problem. And if the people in power cared about that issue, the way that I did, the way

Speaker 4 [00:28:01] that I do well wouldn't be a problem

Speaker 3 [00:28:03] anymore, would it? So they either don't care. And that is absolutely true for lots of people in power because that's not experience, that's not their background. That's not sort of in their wheelhouse, right? They're not social workers for the most part, right? So that tapping into

Speaker 4 [00:28:19] that empathy isn't necessarily

Speaker 3 [00:28:20] going to be

Speaker 4 [00:28:21] effective. So they either

Speaker 3 [00:28:22] don't care about the issue at all or to be more charitable to them, they care about other things more. So what is it that you can do to say, You know what, maybe I'm not going to change their mind, right? Been a senator for twenty five years, they're deeply entrenched in their policy positions.

Speaker 4 [00:28:40] They've won and

Speaker 3 [00:28:40] lost elections based on those public

Speaker 4 [00:28:43] positions. They're probably

Speaker 3 [00:28:44] not going to

Speaker 4 [00:28:45] change their

Speaker 3 [00:28:46] way of

Speaker 4 [00:28:47] thinking.

Speaker 3 [00:28:47] But can I change their strategic calculus? Can I alter their likelihood of winning the next election? Can I impact their fundraising? Can I put so much media pressure on them and embarrass them publicly in such a way that they do what I want them to do, even if they are doing it for an entirely different set of reasons? Super on social work again? Right?

Speaker 4 [00:29:12] But if you want to right sort of think about the ways in which

Speaker 3 [00:29:16] power actually

Speaker 4 [00:29:17] plays out in the

Speaker 3 [00:29:19] world. If all you've got in your toolkit is I'm going to pull on heartstrings and I'm going to engage in rational persuasion. You are going to lose almost every one of your advocacy efforts.

Speaker 2 [00:29:33] That's a sobering realization, especially so given how often that's exactly what happens.

Speaker 3 [00:29:41] Just say one more thing on that, of course. Yeah, sure. So, so going back to sort of linking some of these together and talking about, you know, national policymaking and the slowness and the

Speaker 4 [00:29:50] difficulty of it, one of

Speaker 3 [00:29:51] the miraculous things that happened during

Speaker 4 [00:29:53] the American

Speaker 3 [00:29:54] Relief Plan Act early in 2021

Speaker 4 [00:29:58] was expand. Shin of

Speaker 3 [00:29:59] the child tax credit, right, so we raise the amount of money that's going into

Speaker 4 [00:30:02] each household and

Speaker 3 [00:30:03] making it refundable,

Speaker 4 [00:30:05] which means that weirdly

Speaker 3 [00:30:06] right previous policy, the poorer you are, the less likely you were to get this

Speaker 4 [00:30:10] assistance. We got rid

Speaker 3 [00:30:11] of that terrible structure so that for this brief moment, we actually saw poverty decline in 2021 to its lowest level since we have been keeping track of this

Speaker 2 [00:30:22] and the impact on children especially. Yeah.

Speaker 3 [00:30:25] And largely as a consequence of the expansion of the child tax credit. Rosa DeLauro, representative from Connecticut, started working on expanding the child tax credit. 20 years

Speaker 4 [00:30:39] ago, when she

Speaker 3 [00:30:41] first went to Congress and every

Speaker 4 [00:30:44] year has been

Speaker 3 [00:30:46] fighting to make changes to the child tax credit, to

Speaker 4 [00:30:48] expand it to direct

Speaker 3 [00:30:50] money toward funding good policy papers that would help people understand what the options

Speaker 4 [00:30:55] are and what it could do. She spent

Speaker 3 [00:30:57] literally two decades getting us to

Speaker 4 [00:31:00] the point where in this

Speaker 3 [00:31:02] moment of crisis, that was an option that was on the table,

Speaker 2 [00:31:05] and that was her largely her work. I mean,

Speaker 3 [00:31:08] I mean, lots and lots of other people as well. But I mean, this was sort of I think if you asked her signature issue, I think she would probably put that in her top two or three list.

Speaker 2 [00:31:18] And she struck while the iron was hot. That was the

Speaker 4 [00:31:21] moment, yeah, but couldn't have

Speaker 3 [00:31:22] done it had she not done that 20 decades worth of softening up the ground in advance.

Speaker 2 [00:31:27] I'm embarrassed to say I'm not aware of this person.

Speaker 4 [00:31:30] What is her name again?

Speaker 3 [00:31:32] Rosario S.A. DeLauro, DVLA.

Speaker 4 [00:31:35] You are. Oh, everybody should

Speaker 3 [00:31:37] go off

Speaker 4 [00:31:37] and Google her.

Speaker 3 [00:31:38] She's spectacular.

Speaker 2 [00:31:40] That's a great example. Yeah. So you would think I mean, today's March

Speaker 4 [00:31:46] 1st and a couple of

Speaker 2 [00:31:47] days ago, Russia invaded, attacked its neighbor, a sovereign country aspiring to democracy. It's been an interesting couple of years, hasn't it? White supremacy renewed

Speaker 3 [00:32:02] globally, not just in the United States.

Speaker 2 [00:32:05] Yeah, in all of our

Speaker 4 [00:32:06] societies over

Speaker 2 [00:32:07] the

Speaker 4 [00:32:07] pandemic and you know, the

Speaker 2 [00:32:09] disparities that it has

Speaker 4 [00:32:11] among all the other wreckage,

Speaker 2 [00:32:14] it's just made the disparities that were there all along. Even worse, democracy seems to be in retreat

Speaker 3 [00:32:21] again, not just in the U.S., but in many other places as well, but noticeably here.

Speaker 2 [00:32:25] And again, climate globally, climate. I mean, there was just an article in the Times

Speaker 4 [00:32:29] yesterday that we have

Speaker 2 [00:32:31] even less time to correct than we thought we had two weeks ago. So it just seems like there are ample opportunities for people who care about the big picture and

Speaker 4 [00:32:42] understand the consequences

Speaker 2 [00:32:44] of those big pictures

Speaker 4 [00:32:46] on marginalized people. There's like

Speaker 2 [00:32:48] opportunities galore. What would you say or what do you say, for example, to your students when you present these large, gigantic issues and they wonder what they can do?

Speaker 3 [00:33:01] I'm glad to hear you talk about this growing concatenation of literally existential crises

Speaker 4 [00:33:09] as an opportunity.

Speaker 3 [00:33:11] Yeah, right? Because what's the alternative? I'm just going to say it's like it's it's, you know, in the end, you know, I will tell them, it's like, first of all, you have to understand the scale and scope of the challenges that we are facing.

Speaker 4 [00:33:21] And it is

Speaker 3 [00:33:22] literally not too little to say that we are facing an array of literally existential

Speaker 4 [00:33:26] crisis. So find a place where that can

Speaker 3 [00:33:30] live in your head and your heart. And if you need to periodically sit in the corner and eat a pint of ice cream or right, watch whatever the latest iteration of The Real Housewives is or have a relaxing adult beverage, do that. But then you've got to get

Speaker 4 [00:33:46] out of the corner and figure

Speaker 3 [00:33:48] out what piece of this you can take on. And I think that is the challenge. None of us is going to solve any of those crises. Right? And it's an absurd to imagine that just like I am not in my lifetime Alaska to solve homelessness. But what each and every one of us can do is take a little tiny

Speaker 4 [00:34:10] piece of the issue

Speaker 3 [00:34:12] that we care about most or that we care about at the moment, or that our family cares about our community, cares about and do something. And at the initial level, that's all the ask is find a thing to do. Is there an organization in your neighborhood that is working on the issue? Great. Go to a meeting. Right? Meet some like minded people. Hear what they're talking about. Ask how you can be of help. Right? Don't show up in those spaces expecting to lead or to take charge or assume that you possess knowledge or expertise. You may. But it's also just as likely that there are lots of people in the room who could say the same thing. Show up, listen, look for ways to help in the work that other people are doing. And set reasonable

Speaker 4 [00:35:01] goals, super

Speaker 3 [00:35:02] reasonable, achievable goals in the short, medium and long

Speaker 4 [00:35:06] term, and

Speaker 3 [00:35:08] always celebrate victories no matter how small they

Speaker 4 [00:35:12] are.

Speaker 3 [00:35:13] That's part of what keeps us energized

Speaker 4 [00:35:15] for the work is recognizing there is a

Speaker 3 [00:35:18] giant enormous mountain to

Speaker 4 [00:35:21] climb. Right? But look at this.

Speaker 3 [00:35:23] I just made the first 30 steps that spectacular and the view is different. Let me see if I can take the next 30 steps and how far that gets me again. Slow, incremental. Frustrating. Make peace with that. That's the nature of the beast.

Speaker 2 [00:35:36] I think you may have just answered it, but I'm going to give it a shot anyway.

Speaker 4 [00:35:40] But Dr. Pimpare, I'm a

Speaker 2 [00:35:42] freshly minted MSW. I've got \$40000 in student

Speaker 4 [00:35:46] loans and I'm making

Speaker 2 [00:35:48] forty three thousand dollars a year and I've got a high caseload in my job. Yeah, I can't hear it.

Speaker 3 [00:35:56] I would say two things, and these are going to sound a little more flip than I intend them to. Well, I am so very sorry, but the code of ethics obligates you to engage in that kind of work. And do you mean it or you do not? And a related issue is if you don't do it, who's going to write if we collectively as a profession, do not. And I get it. It's that's totally real, right? Overburdened, underpaid, overwhelmed with what is often a ridiculously, dangerously unmanageable caseload. Your own family and community responsibilities. I get it. You've still got to do the work anyway, and

Speaker 4 [00:36:31] you've got to find a

Speaker 3 [00:36:32] way to carve out the time and the mental and emotional energy to do it. And different people arrive at ways to make space in their life for that

Speaker 4 [00:36:43] in different ways. But I think it's

Speaker 3 [00:36:45] incumbent upon us as a

Speaker 4 [00:36:47] profession to commit

Speaker 3 [00:36:48] to doing it, no matter how hard it is.

Speaker 2 [00:36:51] Thanks for taking a shot at that one.

Speaker 4 [00:36:53] So I've got

Speaker 2 [00:36:54] another one here for you. Our production assistant, Kate Bair's who you met before we started recording. She contributes a lot to these conversations, so she was

Speaker 4 [00:37:04] reviewing your texts

Speaker 2 [00:37:05] and the chapters, and she was actually comprising some reactions and some

Speaker 4 [00:37:10] notes.

Speaker 2 [00:37:10] And I remember when she sent the email to me, she had her notes, but she prefaced it all with, You know, I read all this and a lot of it made me really mad, and a lot of it was really, really good at the same time. And I think that's pretty much it, right? There's no avoiding what this is,

Speaker 4 [00:37:34] and it hurts. It absolutely

Speaker 3 [00:37:35] does. And again, I mean, I mean, when I say we've got to find a space to feel what we're feeling and to acknowledge that and make it real. But I also think that anger and indignation and frustration are emotions that we can turn into action. Yeah. Being depressed. Yeah, feeling hopeless. That that does not readily lead toward action to make things better. And I say this to students all the time, right? If you can find ways

Speaker 4 [00:38:02] instead of being saddened

Speaker 3 [00:38:04] by what you're learning or depressed by what you're learning, but be angry about it. Be energized by energetic. Say absolutely. This is absolutely

Speaker 4 [00:38:13] unacceptable.

Speaker 3 [00:38:14] And I am going to take some small responsibility for making a little piece of it better. Damn it. And if enough people do that, we make progress, right? If I do it by myself and nobody else is doing it well, nothing's going to change. But if we all commit to picking up a little tiny piece

Speaker 4 [00:38:32] of that and pushing it forward,

Speaker 3 [00:38:35] we will get there.

Speaker 2 [00:38:37] And while you're doing all that finding some fellow deviants which will replenish you, there's so much energy to be taken from that. Yeah. So to go to Tolstoy here, given all this, so then what must we do?

Speaker 4 [00:38:54] Right? And you did.

Speaker 2 [00:38:55] You gave us a lot of practical suggestions, but is there anything else that you could even just maybe give one more fleshed out example of even a success story about what a social worker can do to bring about

Speaker 4 [00:39:11] effective change, maybe across the

Speaker 2 [00:39:13] levels of practice? I know I kind of sprung that one on you. So take a time to think it through or you can differ on it completely.

Speaker 3 [00:39:21] So this is a little more abstract, but this, I think, leads us into some of that, as I've suggested. You can't do everything and you can't devote your energy to all of the existential crisis we are facing on a

Speaker 4 [00:39:35] global scale, nor

Speaker 3 [00:39:37] the inevitable array of micro level crises you are facing in your own family, your own neighborhood, your community.

Speaker 4 [00:39:42] Right? But you can't

Speaker 3 [00:39:43] pick anything that for

Speaker 4 [00:39:45] now, you are going to develop your

Speaker 3 [00:39:47] expertise in. And I think that's where it starts, right?

Speaker 4 [00:39:51] And that's not just, you know, reading

Speaker 3 [00:39:53] books and articles and that sort of stuff, although that is a

Speaker 4 [00:39:56] piece of it, but it is

Speaker 3 [00:39:57] learning about the policymaking ecosystem

Speaker 4 [00:40:00] around the

Speaker 3 [00:40:01] particular issue that you care about. Right. So are there local organizations doing work? What are they doing? How are they doing? Do you know any of those people? Do they have open forums? Can you pop in virtually or in the real world and get to know them a bit? Are there local write newsletters you can regularly be checking in on once a week? Can you set up alerts for your Legislature

Speaker 4 [00:40:21] is doing with keywords

Speaker 3 [00:40:23] around your issue so that anytime something pops up, you are aware of it

Speaker 4 [00:40:28] if you are interested

Speaker 3 [00:40:29] in levels of service provision, right? Can you check in periodically? What kind of budget money is going into

Speaker 4 [00:40:35] places, right? Again, sort of

Speaker 3 [00:40:37] super unsexy stuff, right? But I feel like that's where all of us to begin again when we think about sort of what is that strategic intervention down the road look like? Draw on on what you have learned as a practitioner and a student, and deepen your knowledge and your expertise around

Speaker 4 [00:40:57] the issue so that

Speaker 3 [00:40:58] you really can be thoughtful and strategic when the time for intervening comes around

Speaker 2 [00:41:04] and with a healthy dose of patience and grit. Yeah, yeah. All right.

Speaker 4 [00:41:09] So it's been a

Speaker 2 [00:41:11] great pleasure to talk with you. Your energy is clearly infectious.

Speaker 3 [00:41:16] We're in the middle of a pandemic, Peter. Please do not describe me as infectious. Yes. I've enjoyed my time very much, thanks so much

Speaker 2 [00:41:27] for hanging out. It's been a guess. Thanks. Thanks again.

Speaker 1 [00:41:30] inSocialWork as a production of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work and our deviant production team includes director and web site manager Steve Sturman. Our Swiss Army knife of podcast production Cate Bearss. And I'm Peter Sobota. We chase important ideas and release a new podcast every month. If you have a podcast app already far worse, you know the truth. If you found us on our web page in social work dot org, download our podcast app and follow us to get every podcast we released plopped right into your cute library of our previous podcast is available on our website. And we'd love to hear what you think of our show. See you next time, everybody.