

International 5: Estefana

Hi and welcome to Social Work Spotlight, where I showcase different areas of the profession each episode, with a 12-month focus on social workers around the world as of August 2025. I'm your host, Yasmine Loupis, and today's guest is Estefana, a seasoned trauma therapist and the Director of Clinical Training at ARISE Alliance Institute, where she develops and implements training curricula in Critical Memory Integration (CMI™) to bolster trauma-informed and PTSD treatment practices. With over two decades in mental health, spanning roles from behavioural health technician to medical and residential social work, including a teaching stint in Japan, she now also practices at Lighthouse Psychiatry and TMS in Gilbert, Arizona, supporting clinical care and psychedelic research. Her own background as a first-generation child of immigrants fuels her dedication to vulnerable populations; she serves as Lead Volunteer, Board Member, and Clinical Director of ASA Now, contributing to its therapeutic school, Shade Tree Academy.

Yasmine Thank you so much, Estefana, for joining me today. I'm looking forward to having a chat with you about all things social work.

Estefana Yeah, it's awesome to be with another social worker.

Yasmine Yeah, I always ask firstly, to get us going, when did you get started in social work? What brought you to the profession?

Estefana I was working in behavioural health. I didn't ever think I would be a therapist, and just fell in love with the work. And my job, believe it or not, was like, you're going to be a therapist, and I'm like, I don't even know if I want to do that. So I asked a colleague, what route do I take? And she said, well, if you're not sure if you want to sit and do therapy, then do social work route, because you'll have more avenues, you know, in terms of your, your options of, for career. So I'm so glad I did, because I've been able to experience different aspects of what a social work could be, you know, from hospital social work to therapy, to community, you know, advocacy and things like that. And I got a disorder, ADHD so you know variety is really important to keep me engaged and passionate about stuff, so it just worked out.

Yasmine And when you say therapy, did you study psychology as well as maybe an undergrad degree, or did you just dive straight into social work because you thought therapy is the way to go and social work therapy is what I'm interested in?

Estefana Well what's interesting is, no I didn't. So this is kind of a unique story in terms of my career. I initially didn't make it through college. I was gonna go into nursing, I didn't like it, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. And then I got this job as a behavioural health technician and fell in love with just working with humans. I don't know, I loved it. I worked with at-risk youth and got really good at it. So in Arizona, when you're working for the state, like a state organisation, I worked with juveniles with sexual delinquency, so sexual behaviour problems. And back then, you could become a specialised, like a therapist in that, with a bachelor's degree, as long as you had your certification. And certification is like pretty extensive process, you know, like a lot of studying, a lot of tests, pre-test, post-test, like a 40-hour intense course. And so my degree at that time, because I had no idea what I was going to do with my life, they said, just get your bachelor's, any bachelor's, it doesn't matter. So I ended up going to a local university and did bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies with an emphasis in humanities.

And it was just to finish school. Got into that, got the position as a clinician, as a therapist, of course with supervision, but it was one of the hardest jobs. I mean, you're working with 12, 13 year old offenders, you're doing court reports, you're doing individual family group therapy with, I think arguably one of the most difficult populations that anybody in our field could work with. And so that's kind of like, I got thrown into the deep end because of, you know, I just connected with those kids well. And I wasn't sure I was going to like it, but I fell in love with the work and I was really good at it. So eventually the education waiver that they provided expires after five years and they were like, you either get your degree or, or move on to another job. So that's when I started going to school. So I got it extended a couple more years, got my social work degree, and you know, have kind of expanded my career since then. But it really was almost like the path was laid out before me and I just answered the call, I guess.

Yasmine And did you have much exposure? You mentioned the ADHD, that if you're like most women, probably a diagnosis came later in life.

Estefana Oh, way later. Yeah, like three years ago. Yeah, like three years ago.

Yasmine Was there much exposure or understanding, I guess, of what social work was or could be for you?

Estefana Not at all. I'm embarrassed to say back then, I probably thought social workers were the ones that took kids away from families. That was my limited understanding of it. I didn't really care to look into what that career would mean. It really became like an avenue through which I could continue doing what I was doing. It's kind of opposite, versus somebody who looks at that degree hoping that they can do something. It was more like I was doing the thing before I had the degree and really fell in love with it. In hindsight, I think that was very helpful in terms of developing me as the clinician that, the way I attune and the way I think outside of the box, because I wasn't yet like programmed to think inside of the box. So I had to do what works, and we're working with outliers, know, juvenile delinquents. That's a whole nother ball game. You can't, they don't, especially 12, 13 year old offenders, they don't follow the norm of development or. The way they think. And so you already have to kind of think outside of the box and try to make sense of something that doesn't make sense. So I feel that was probably my best training. And then I was so lucky to, the fact that I'm like bilingual, you know, Spanish was my first language. So at that time, I became a translator for the other clinicians. So I got to spend a lot of time in different groups in individual and family sessions for the clients that we had that were Spanish speaking. So I'm translating for therapists, you know, and so I got to see different styles, different approaches, and I know that was probably the best training that I had throughout. When you talk about education, the things you learn in the classroom are not as valuable as the things you learn out in the field.

Yasmine But you would have had a very different approach as a translator, with a therapy background, to if they had just enlisted the support of a translator that didn't have that, or maybe that had a medical background, but they weren't quite in the field. So do you think that maybe complicated things for you because you were exposed to so much more and you understood what was going on?

Estefana You know, it's funny asking these questions, because I'm realising real time right now, that that is where I first started seeing some of these discrepancies in our field, is some of the questions that my colleagues would be asking as I'm translating or their interpretation of things, I'm looking at it from a non-educated Hispanic first generation Mexican American trying to translate what they're asking, and what you're asking lets me know you don't understand their

experience. So in my own mind, I was already translating it to, what is it that the therapist is wanting to know from this and how can I rephrase it in a way that we get the proper answer or the accurate answer, and not what is literally being asked.

Yasmine Yeah, so it's like you're translating culture as much as language.

Estefana Yes. Yeah. Because I'm thinking, some of the questions that they were asking, I see why you're asking that because that applies here, but in context of, these individuals came or they're not documented or this is happening, and what you are seeing or what you're looking for has nothing to do with the reality. It just, now as you're asking, nobody's asked me that, I guess. And I never realised that as I'm in my mind, going back to some of the experiences I had with those early on clients, then I thought I would do things differently if I was a therapist. I didn't yet see myself as capable of getting my master's degree or, you know, I didn't think I was smart enough to be educated, I guess, because I didn't do well in school growing up. And so that was always like part of my thing I had to get past, is like my own insecurities, my own lived experience that was not reflective of my capacity. It was not necessarily true. It was a belief that I had adapted, but I think it started there. And to be able to do that real time, now I realise that took some skill to be able to hear what the therapist was saying, understand the context of what they're trying to get to, translate it culturally and linguistically for the client to then be able to respond. And then I'm translating it back culturally and linguistically to give the clinician the answer that they were looking for.

Yasmine And it's all well and good to say you're trauma-informed, but if you don't understand the context of the trauma that perhaps they've lived through to get to this point, then you can't be trauma-informed. There's just not the capacity.

Estefana Yeah, what's so hard, Yasmine, and I think this is where I constantly find my, there's passion in this too, because there's a frustration, is there's such a pathologising of human experience, right? So something that was normal to us growing up, other people might perceive as trauma. And to me, I'm like, that's just another Thursday, you know, that's just life. And then something that maybe was traumatic to me, that the experience was like earth shattering, it was destroying, like someone else might not see it as a big deal, especially in context with the other experiences. And that probably also is one of my passions, is that trauma is not about an event. You know, we're taught like with the diagnosis, the DSM, at least that's what we use here, these are the criterion that would qualify as what we as professionals believe is a legit problem or not a legit problem. Coverable, you know, by insurance or not. And I'm thinking people could have all of those symptoms and not have any of the criteria that you qualify as a trauma, and yet they're stuck. Or people could have gone through all of those events and not be traumatised in the sense of how you define trauma. And those are kind of the nuances that led to this. There's got to be a better way of understanding what is the problem. I'm not limited by my experiences. As you hear that, oh my gosh, they went through that, they're never going to be normal. Said who? And what is normal?

Yasmine Yeah, I love that. I think also that speaks to, that pathologising is real, there is so much that we learn that assumes, if you take a Freudian approach, say, that all issues stem from repressed emotion or daddy issues or whatever it is, why can't we just be in the shit? Be having a horrible situation because it's a horrible situation. Why does it always have to be caused by or a result of something?

Estefana Yeah. And because it's life. Like, I just said this discussion. Somebody was asking, well, do you believe things happen for a reason? I'm like, yeah, the reason is that's life.

But the meaning you put behind it, that matters. That's where we hold our agency, our freedom to decide. What does that mean? Is that going to limit me or not? I decide that.

Yasmine Yeah, nice. And how do you bring that behavioural health technician hat into the ring now with the social work training that you've had? How does it all differ to regular social work? What would you say makes you unique?

Estefana So when you work with outliers, it's all the individuals that would never qualify to participate in a study, right? Because if we know how research works, we're doing some like research on psychedelics in our organisation right now. So I get to be a part of that. And I'm telling you, by the time we go through, you could have 35 applicants and only one makes it through to the actual dosing. They all fall point because they don't, they're an outlier this way or that way. So you have to have kind of a homogeneous group to study so that you can try to reduce as much as possible all the other factors that could play a role in whether this is effective or not. But by the time you get that one, when you're doing that, I get it with medication. I get it with psychedelics. But if you're doing this in terms of like a mental health approach, well, you have this homogeneous group, but then you get this product of this intervention that probably has shown efficacy with that particular group, but then when you apply it in real life, you have all 35 individuals coming through your office. So it's really only supported with one out of those 35. What about the other 34, right? How do you adjust? Because then we're taught to follow the protocols for the sake of fidelity. And so these are the pieces that, to me, were like, OK, there's some good stuff here. There's truth about maybe this part helps and that part helps, but then in context of this individual, it no longer applies. How do I modify that?

Yasmine Is it tricky then from an ethics clearance perspective to be able to jump through those hoops?

Estefana Well, that's the problem. There's a conflict with ethics themselves, because you're saying you need to respect the person's agency, but their agency is limited to fitting in the modality that you decided was adequate for them.

Yasmine Yeah.

Estefana So where's the agency there? And it's like all sizes fit one. That's not how the world works. So what that results in, in the people who come in looking for a specific modality or approach that has the most robust evidence, and they don't do well with it, what does that leave to be assumed? That they are broken beyond repair. That the problem is them. It's not the modality, it's not the practitioner, because they know what they're doing. They're educated, they're trained. And they're using all established evidence-based approaches. So then it leaves the person feeling worse. And I've heard this from multiple clients. I went to the best clinician, they had a doctorate level, and they couldn't help me. So I know for a fact it's me. That broke my heart. That pissed me off, really, because when I get sad, I get mad. That's part of my trauma training, I guess, my trauma response.

Yasmine And where's the ethics in that? If people have been excluded from the opportunity to participate in something that's going to a) help them and b) help people like them. Yeah.

Estefana Yeah. Who are we to define what is help for you? What is it that you need? What makes me the expert to say you need to change this or you need to change that? That's none of my business. My business is to support you in your agency to live the best potential life or

reclaim your freedom or whatever it is. That is my business. How do I do that when everybody's so different?

Yasmine Before we got online you were speaking about having worked in Japan, and I'm curious, not to bounce too much back and forward, but what were you doing and how did that all come about?

Estefana It's so funny. That's part of my integration process, that I realised I'm such a rebel. That it was so tough being in a different environment growing up, from a Mexican household in an American culture, that I think out of sheer rebellion, I'm like, if this is gonna happen to me, I'm gonna make it happen. I'm gonna go to a country myself and do it because I want to. I don't know, I feel like there was a part of me that decided that I'm gonna own this experience, because it was always a desire within me. My brother was in the military and I told him, whatever country you get assigned to outside of America, I wanna come with you. I wanna be there with you. I wanna learn another language. I wanna experience a different culture. And it just so happened that the man who's my husband, at the time, when I was working on going to Japan, he actually, we weren't dating yet, but I found out he was going to Japan as well. And I was like, oh, he must be my husband. I'm gonna let him know. Very awkward conversation. But I let him know. We're married 20 years now, so it worked out, you know. But that's how. We went and taught English. I taught preschool in Japan. Hardest job, by the way. You think trauma work is hard, like, try playing monster for eight hours a day. That's exhausting.

Yasmine Oh my goodness. I don't think I could cope. So how is your Japanese now?

Estefana Sukoshi. I know very little. I have a friend here that moved here from Japan. I taught her kid in preschool when he was three, and now he's 22. Yeah. And so I'm very blessed that they moved here. So I get to see her once in a while, and she speaks broken English and I speak broken Japanese, and so we meet somewhere in the middle. And it's, that's the only time I get to practice, but I don't, you know, I know the important words, when I'm really upset or, know, things like that. Other than that, it's very...

Yasmine I'm guessing in Arizona, there's very limited opportunity to practice it, unfortunately.

Estefana Oh yeah. There's not, there's not. In Spanish I could practice a lot, not Japanese.

Yasmine And what then triggered the move back to the US for you?

Estefana Well, you know, the time there was always meant to be temporary. We went as teachers, and it was going to be for one year, we extended it to two. And then we came back to America. I didn't realise how much that whole experience probably was some of my best training for social work. Because we know that in our industry, trying to connect to the experience of the struggles that people have, either as like, you know, if they're coming from other countries or they're coming from kind of a different reality, a different world, we don't know what is our culture until you're living in a different culture. I didn't realise what it was to be an American until I lived there and stuck out like a sore thumb because of the way I did things or the way I thought. And then to go through the experience of having to adjust to a world that doesn't understand you and doesn't accommodate you, it makes you pay attention to things you normally wouldn't pay attention to. Like, I was telling someone about how overnight I became illiterate and dumb because I didn't know the language and I didn't know how to read. They've got three alphabets. Did you know that?

Yasmine Oh, I actually tried to learn through Duolingo and I thought, you know what, I've got a good handle on this. I'm feeling confident about the alphabet. Next chapter, whole new alphabet. I was like, hang on a minute, that's not fair.

Estefana Yeah. And I was learning to read from my preschool kids. You know, they're like, teaching me their books, because it was like Hiragana Katakana. There's 72 letters. I did memorise those, but when it got to Kanji, forget about it. I might have known maybe 10 symbols. But it was funny, because they'd be like teaching me during breaks how to read. Good job, good job, they'd tell you. It humbles you a little bit.

Yasmine And South Korea have two completely different number systems, which I learned when I was there, which is absolutely wild. So they have the Chinese numbering system and then the Korean system, and they use different numbering systems depending on what they're talking about.

Estefana Yes. I mean, Japan, they do that with objects. Like, if you have something cylindrical, it's like ippon, nippon, you know, like it's not, if it's something tiny, it's ichiki, nichiki or something like that you ... there's different ways that you, it's sort of the number, you know, ichi ni san shi, like numbers are normal. But the way you would say like one cup versus one chapstick is going to be different. The number, the way you mentioned the number, because if it's small you say it one way. If it's cylindrical, like a drink, it's different. If it's a large thing, if it's a person, it's different. Hito, so you know, so yeah, I was definitely challenging.

Yasmine Drowning, a little bit.

Estefana Yeah.

Yasmine You said it was a really good foundation, and I'm guessing also the work that you were doing in the behavioural health sphere and even just the translating for your colleagues had such an amazing foundation in social work before you even started practicing as a social worker. Did you have a good understanding of, once you got back to the States, where your career trajectory would go? Did you have an idea of what you wanted to do after that?

Estefana When I got back to the US I hadn't done my master's yet, but that's when all of that, I got back in 2006. I had been a behavioural health technician, I had done case management. I had done supervised, like the behavioural health tech. So I had worked on the floor, like in the trenches for years. And then as a case manager become familiar with the requirements from courts, the requirements from, you know, I'd prepare reports for like, they call them behavioural health authorities. So kind of like the Medicaid, the government funding and their requirements for what they look for to prove progress, to approve payments. Those experiences before I even became a therapist, I know helped me really better understand the full system. So I didn't realise how that is so social work, right? You're looking at the entire system, not just individual from both like the macro mezzo perspectives instead of just micro. And I realised once I became a therapist, a lot of the staff would come to me because how I answered questions, how I addressed issues, were different from the ones who came in with their master's degree and all their knowledge from college, because I had been on the floor. And I knew that that thing that you researched, if you come across a kid that way, you're going to get punched in the face, right? It's something that works with the typical person, but not with these kids. So I realised there was value in that over time, that it was something that could really help those that work with outliers, right? With, with high needs populations. And I realised how much

of a training that was. By the time I went back for my master's, so I did my certification, I became a therapist in 2009 and did everything, individual, family, group, therapy. And then by the time I went back for my master's, I barely had to crack very many books. Cause a lot of the situations they presented or papers, hopefully they don't catch me that I say this, cause I graduated with 4.0, but because the concepts they taught, like, oh yeah, I've seen that. Oh yeah, this is how it plays out. And then I just bring up the concept in one of the cases I treated that I was very familiar with. And I put in, plug in the theories, I plug in the, this is how we figured it out before I even knew it was an approach, and then my professors were super impressed thinking I did all this research, and I'm like, nah, that was a case I had back in 2010 or ... It became easy to like understand what is being taught in schools, because you had context to it.

Yasmine And did you get any sort of recognition of prior learning? Because when we do our master's program or even our bachelor's, because you can either do a bachelor's of social work or a master's if, let's say you've done a previous somewhat related bachelor degree, you can do two years additional which is your master's. But regardless of which pathway you choose you have to do a thousand hours of practical placement. Did you get any sort of exemption from having to do part of your placement?

Estefana Nope.

Yasmine No?

Estefana None at all.

Yasmine Or maybe the opposite is the case, where they thought you've had all this experience on this spectrum, we want you to get experience with something completely different.

Estefana Yeah. What's funny is, when they wanted me to do clinical experience, like, I have, that's like easy. So I actually got a paid placement because the organisation knew my work history and wanted to pay me for an internship. So I lucked out that way, because they were hiring an intern that yeah, has, you know, significant experience. So it kind of worked in that way. I guess that would be the perk that I got. I didn't get to reduce the amount of hours I had to take or even the first couple years, a lot of times when we're in like the supervision, I had more complex cases in the past than my clinical supervisor did. So was interesting dynamic of how those sessions would go, you know. Not to snitch anyone out, but.

Yasmine No, sure.

Estefana Yeah. It's a very non-traditional route, man. It's not, it doesn't happen very often. I'm very aware of that.

Yasmine That's what we need. I think you're going to have that life experience and the work experience that you're going to bring into any role. So it really doesn't matter what you're gonna do, but it's great that you mentioned you did feel like you really benefited from having gone through the master's program because you were able to put a language to things and say, yes, technically this is what I do and this is why I do it, as opposed to just doing the thing and not having that critical reflection.

Estefana Yes, it gives us that common language to say, oh, this is why it works, right? To say, and this is what I've seen in practice, but what's the theory behind it? Oh, now I know

there's an actual thing behind it. This is what I was doing. So it's almost like reverse engineering, I guess.

Yasmine Yeah. Yeah. There is a lot of noise at the moment in Australia around the unpaid hours that are required as part of the bachelor's degree. And it's the same in nursing and education. But because it's a thousand hours of unpaid placement, often that's prohibitive for people who are already somewhat disadvantaged, from even studying social work. And they're probably the people who would most be able to contribute widely to the profession. But there is some light at the end of the tunnel, even if it's tiny, in that the government have recently announced that for some students, they're able to while they're on placement, give them a small stipend, which is effectively the equivalent of, so we have, our social security equivalent is called Centrelink, and they have payments for people who are studying. So there's an Austudy or Abstudy, but whatever you are able to get, if you don't have significant income from somewhere else while you're studying, you can access that payment from the government to assist with your living costs while doing your unpaid hours. Having said that it's only for people who are studying full-time, so for instance my social work student last year who was studying part-time and working part-time, she wouldn't have been able to access that. And the same way, I had a student this year who was initially studying her bachelor, she changed to the Bachelor of Community Services because there were only 500 hours required instead of a thousand hours. And with two kids, it was just not realistic for her. So I think those conversations are really important in terms of who we try to attract into the profession.

Estefana Well, we're gatekeeping the wrong people. You know, I could tell you there's, if I did not have the support of old colleague that said I will intern you, I couldn't have made it. I wouldn't have graduated. And I, of all people, like I bring in lived experience. I've seen it from the inside, experienced from the inside, but neither of my parents finished college. You know, my mom had a third grade education. My father had an eighth grade education. This is from Mexico, not American. They didn't speak English. Everything was a struggle financially. So we're relying on the very system that social workers are supposed to understand, but have never experienced themselves if you were privileged enough to be able to pay for your school and not work and work for free because of your giving heart, but that's not enough. It's not enough. So many amazing souls that have such a giving heart and want to help, but some of those that actually have lived through the struggle, that have been in the system from the inside, they're gatekept out of our industry. And it's so valuable that that is, I think, we bring in perspectives that you can't just read in a book and understand, right? It's lived experience. So that we could say, this is why that's going to be limited. This is why we need to step outside of that. And that's part of my passion. It's also part of the weight that I carry in terms of feeling like there's a responsibility, is I'm one that got through. I'm one that was blessed enough. Trust me, my eyeball was twitching the entire semester. I felt like I was gonna get locked up at some point. Any minute now I'm gonna be in jail. Thank God I had an amazing husband. You know, it just, that was really, really rough. It was so rough to get through school, and it's not gonna be all for nothing. That's why I'm like, no, I didn't struggle for nothing. Like, we're gonna do something with it.

Yasmine And what are you doing with it now? I feel like you've got a few different hats, so what would you say your current role/roles are, and there's no typical day in social work, but what do you find yourself doing day to day?

Estefana I'm doing everything I can. So I am part of Arise Alliance, Director of Clinical Training at Arise Alliance and where I was part of the development team that developed CMI, Critical Memory Integration. So that's pretty much a way of helping individuals get to the root of

what leads to their behaviour, their thought process. You know, when you get stuck in loops and things like that. But we took that, we're already training clinicians. It's a training that is meant for licensed clinicians to use in their practice, but the concepts in it are humanistic, you know. It's human centred, it's about the organic way that the brain digests experience. So that information is useful for anyone. And I recognise that when I was teaching, oftentimes clients would come in and just with the psychoeducation part of it, was enough for them to come the next session and say, you've changed my life. Because I didn't understand this before and now I do. So I thought we can take that and take it out into the community. So I had already been involved with ASNL, local nonprofit. There's actually three branches. We have the advocacy support and assistance. And I got joined up with them in 2016 when they presented a law for foster kids. And back then I was working a lot with foster adoptive kids and was pissed off about so many things with the system, that I was like, I'm going to join something, we're going to change something. That's how I came across them. And then I've just been their clinical director since. So we went from advocacy support, kind of presenting new bills to then a community centre, because we realised a lot of foster parents have limited resources, limited time. We need everything under one roof. So I provide like some of psychoeducation piece for those foster parents to continue their ongoing education and trauma informed approaches. But we have like food pantry, clothing pantry, we do life skills classes, all of that under one roof. And then we took it further to say, we need a school that's trauma informed. Like, our public school system is not structured to accommodate these kids that are outliers, that are moving from school to school, that lack the emotion and behaviour aspect of education, right? That they can't, intellectually, you're not gonna pick up things when your body's in survival mode. And so we started a school called Shade Tree Academy, and we actually, it should be, the new building will be built by December, I believe, this year will be opening. But so far we've been running it inside Jacobs Mission Community Centre. So I supervise the social work interns there, help with the program development and have recently created the Beyond Behaviours program that has the CMI based. It's like semi-informed in the sense that we believe that it's those critical experiences that then lead to our ability, to how we go through adversity, how we experience life, how we view ourselves. And so it's focused on the capacity building rather than the behaviour, right? So interpreting. And then I also practice at Lighthouse Psychiatry. So Monday and Tuesdays are my practice days, because I didn't want to lose my connection with clients, my clinical skills, you know? So I get at least 18 hours a week. And in that organisation, we have all like psychiatry, we do TMS, we do Spravato, like Ketamine, and are all about innovating. You know, we were very integrative model. We have our own pharmacy. And so when our CEO said, you know, want to get into some of these research studies with psychedelics, which is right up my alley, because I'm very fascinated with memory reconsolidation and all of that, so I got certified as a DSM Dosing Session Monitor, and do that as well whenever the opportunity comes, when we have like a person who, you know, goes through all the criteria. So we're part of a big study right now, phase four trial for LSD for generalised anxiety disorder. So also through that, we have done a lot of community outreach efforts. And so my local city where I live, actually the city government, had me do a talk for their employees, and said everybody needs this. So we turned it into a series. And now they got funding, and I'm doing the first public workstop that is free to all community members to come learn about how to better understand your nervous system, your thought process, how to stay calm and regulated in crisis. And that launches on September 9th. Super excited about that, because this is like a dream of mine to be able to make this accessible for anyone out there that doesn't have insurance, doesn't have the means or the time, or would never show up at a therapist office. There's so many people that need help, but I feel like we should go where they are. And in addition to that, we had the police department who has now created a mental health unit. And so I recently did a training for them a couple of weeks ago on connecting. Like, when you go to crisis, how do you best respond? Of course, using my experience with the crisis and the residential treatment, and they absolutely loved it

and said, this is different, this is transformative. And so now we're looking to connect with them to work on other projects to go into other crisis response from either like fire and the crisis response unit. So there's so many things that are happening all at once. So many hats I wear, but pretty much if you offer it, I'm going to be there. I'm going to do it. If I have the time, I'm going to show up and I'm going to share what I know. I am very involved in the foster adoptive community. So I did, just did a talk on Saturday, you know, on leaning into imperfections. But yeah, I'm social working every angle I can.

Yasmine I think that's an understatement. You've got so much happening, but coming back to that system and the system's not working, you reminded me that there's a really great short film that was created in Australia, which was portraying a very real situation of domestic and family violence from all different perspectives, but really well done. There was a quote from that. Someone was saying the system is broken. And the legal advocate, the support person was saying no, the system is not broken. It's operating in exactly the way that it was built to operate, which is a nod to the fact that these things, these systems or these ways of working, have been perpetuated over time. They've not been challenged. You're here to ruffle feathers, to agitate as much as possible so that hopefully because of your experience, because of your training, you can see the gaps and you can see where things can be done better. And hopefully you're helping to make those changes.

Estefana I'm hoping to, I think I am. I mean, I'm here to, because not once have I come across somebody that says, well, that's not true. You know, their experience. Here it is. And this is what I see. It's the things that people are too scared to say. You know, when someone calls me and they tell me about an experience, and I know someone else would be like, well, just report it to the police. I'm like, do you understand the true process? Do you understand that the justice system is created to protect the perpetrator, not the victim? And the victims, most victims are so traumatised, they'll never be able to withstand the challenges that they have to face, the adversity they have to face just to prove that something happened to them. This is why those pieces, it's not trauma informed. And it's not built, and I'm not saying it's, we still have one of the best justice systems considerably, you know, when you look at other countries, but it's not imperfect. There are a lot of faults within it. And I just had this person that I met on Saturday where I'm like, I think this is my way in to talk to judges and attorneys. And I will come in and help them understand the process of being human. This is how humans work. It's not broken ones. This is how we work, all of us work. And this is why there's limitations in the way we view things and the way we think that justice, I've been working with, you know, kids in the foster system, so many horrific things that I witnessed injustices that I owe it to them to be their voice to say, when someone tells me, well, that the system is the best we've got, that's not enough. That's not enough. And it's not for me, but it's for those kids who have been done wrong. You know, it becomes my mission to carry.

Yasmine Yeah. There was also a really great, it was a story that was presented on Australian television a year or so ago, and it was looking at non-attendance of kids in school, and predominantly those with learning difficulties or autism spectrum. Kids that just were not able to conform to what was expected of them in a normal structure, they just couldn't engage with the normal process. Which is coming back to what you were saying about Shade Tree Academy and providing opportunities for people to, they want to be at school and they want to learn, it's just the structure is not there for them.

Estefana Yeah, trying to get a fish to climb water. That's not how, and it doesn't, you know, me having gone through that like firsthand, of thinking I was dumb, I'm not dumb, clearly. Like, I know that now I can translate things that other people have a hard time or understand concepts,

but it was that I had ADHD, so I couldn't sit for nothing. There was so much trauma and adversity as a child that my nervous system was on constant alert. So it doesn't matter how good the teacher is in engaging someone, if there's bullets flying through the room, nobody's paying attention, and people don't get that. Your nervous system senses danger. There's nothing that you could do to force the kid to sit and read or to comprehend what is being communicated if they're not in state of safety. And when I see kids struggle and I'm thinking we're failing them because we're trying to make them fit in something they weren't built for, it's like taking a fish and trying to make them learn how to climb a tree. The problem's not the tree. The problem is the misunderstanding of the fish, you know?

Yasmine Yeah. And given the really tough context of the work that you're doing, the difficult things that you see every day and helping people to understand and process that, what support do you need in order to continue doing this work? How do you make sure it's sustainable for you? Because it sounds like in between those many things that you're doing day to day, there's not potentially a huge amount of time for downtime or supervision or reflection.

Estefana I do a lot of reflection. I mean, I do a lot of meditation. I find that at some point you get to a place where you are chartering territories that it's really hard to get someone else outside of you to tell you. If you can get instructions and guidance from someone else, that means you're not doing anything new, right? That means that somebody else has been there. So what you need to learn to focus on and rely on is an internal compass, not an external map. And so this is part of like what we do with CMI, and I find that that is the best way to navigate life. Because when we just follow what has always been done, we keep getting what has always been gotten, and it's not working. So you have to learn to be that break out of the system, which means you're going into uncharted territory. So what is your guide? Your guide has to be inside. So I do a lot of meditation. I mean, there's times that I don't want to, I'm angry, I'm upset, I'm feeling it. And I tell people, I try to have a bit of breakdown at least once a month for good old self care. You know what? I get frustrated and I sit and I, you know, if I cry or I'm upset, and then once it passes, the clarity comes again and I get back up, dust myself off and keep going. And I teach my kids to do the same. This is resiliency. You don't avoid the pain, move into it, learn from it, grab the wisdom that it's giving you, be open to it, allow it to build you, to inform you, to continue to develop you so that you can be stronger, bigger, greater for the next thing that comes. It's gonna break you down. And it's this process, that's the only way. I remember the first time I tried to go to a therapist, and they told me I was too much. And I, never again. You know, too much for what they think life should be like, but my life doesn't look like yours. So who are you gonna go to? You have to go inside. You have to learn to trust yourself. I don't need somebody to tell me what's right or wrong. I feel it in my soul. When that child, when that person, and you're trying to prove something or teach them something that doesn't match their reality, I feel it in here. I tune into that. And then I pivot, I open to what else is possible. And you have to learn to do that. But here we are creating a structure that demands that you ask someone that's better, smarter, more experienced than you. Yeah, there's wisdom in that. But ultimately, if they don't teach you to look within and trust yourself, then the moment they're gone, you're screwed. You're lost. And we're doing a disservice to people by teaching them to look for answers outside of themselves.

Yasmine Yeah. It's that whole teach a person to fish thing, right? Where's the capacity building?

Estefana Yeah. So how do I know? Well, I know what's right and wrong. I know what's humane and inhumane, right? And sometimes what's right with the system is inhumane. Just because something's legal doesn't mean it's right. Or if it's illegal, doesn't mean it's wrong. I

mean, look at our whole, look at the Holocaust. Look at the history of America. It was illegal for blacks and whites to mix. Does that make it right? No. So what tells you what's right or wrong? It's within you. Is it connecting you? Is it coming from a place of connection, compassion, love? And if it's not, it's probably wrong.

Yasmine Yeah. Where are things going right? What can you see that either maybe there are changes afoot or people are actually listening to people like yourself who are questioning the status quo? Are there some good news stories coming out of all this work?

Estefana So many. My favourite thing about doing this is the amazing, amazing people I meet that have been on the same journey, that have the same passion. And the moment our eyes meet, the moment we talk, it's like, I know you are my kin. You're over there, but you see what I see and you feel what I feel and you're on the same mission, and let's join forces. It's like this tribe that has emerged. So it's not just me. I know it's not me, but it's like, to a certain level you feel alone. But then after that, it's not about supervision. It's not about that. It's about coming together. It's about synergy. It's about recognising that I've got this part and they've got that part. Like my colleague, I hate research. I'm so like, give me something to draw and I'll draw it and I'll use like analogies, that's like my thing. But my partner, Brian, he's so academic and he's a researcher and he does just a fantastic job of really getting into the weeds of, you know, just very articulate and precise with his language. And I think it's just a thing of beauty, but I can never do that. It's like watching a violinist, you know, play the violin that has, that's their gift. But we have the same heart. And if you met us, like we're the complete polar opposites. Oh my gosh, personality, you know, and all these things. But we connect with the mission, and bringing in that diversity is what helps us expand. We have to connect with those that are different from us so that we can expand our reach and translate. It's the same mission, right, of uniting, of healing, of bringing that into humanity. And when I meet somebody else that's doing that, it's like, I see you and I know you and let's do this together. And we just support, that's been the most beautiful aspect. I mean, all the stuff that I've been doing, like with the city, this, I didn't facilitate that. I came across, somebody met me and said, they need you over here. And they decided, and they got funding and they made it happen. And I just show up.

Yasmine But that doesn't happen unless you put yourself out there.

Estefana You have to. And you have to show who you are and what you're about so they can see that it's OK for them to be who they are and what they are about. And we're going to join forces and be about it together. And then their passion ignites your passion and things start moving. So a support, I don't want anyone to be like, oh good job, look how support. That don't help me, I'm carrying a 50 tonne box, go grab the other corner and carry some of this with me. And if we're all doing it together, it's not about achievement, it's not about success, it's about synergy, it's about working together and we can live so much more. That to me, that's the gold. Oh, it just fills me. You know what's so beautiful, Yasmine? Like lot of my clients that I've been doing CMI with have now gone on to start their own nonprofits. They turn their trauma into purpose. Just, it fills me, because here they are coming here, they find themselves, they discover their power. And it's not about managing their symptoms. It's about like transforming them to purpose. And that to me is how you change the world.

Yasmine Yeah, that's so beautiful. Speaking of transforming, you mentioned the research that you're doing with the psychedelics and Ketamine specifically, I was recently speaking with another wonderful social worker in Canada, actually, Matt, who has done some training in Ketamine. And he and his wife are both social workers and are integrating it into their therapy.

But I've also heard a lot about psilocybin and other things like that. Do you think there's scope for you to expand?

Estefana We're open, like, and right now the study, so it's like, those substances are not legal in Arizona. So it has to come through, you know, only for research purposes. So the way it works is like, you'll have a pharmaceutical company that approaches us to be one of their locations. That's how we get involved in the study. We have, you know, psychiatrists there that are primary investigators, one specific psychiatrist that has a lot of experience in psychedelic research, so we're so lucky to have him. But yeah, we had another study that was coming through and then halfway through my training for that one, they turned out, they maxed out on the participants they were able to complete their study. So then that fell off. But yeah, we're absolutely open, and I've gotten additional training for the psilocybin, but you know, whatever shows up, whatever, we're open to any of it. I think it's all, the more we understand, the broader we can open our perspective, I think the better we can understand why this works. How does this apply? What are the similarities between something like that versus like even to me, the connection with someone provides their nervous system the space of safety, that they're able to access these memories. You're just doing it like chemically over here with psychedelics, but I feel like the mechanism of action is the same. We're editing that default mode network, that sense of self. And so the psychiatrist actually, that specialises with psychedelic approaches, he took my training for CMI and said, you're doing the same concept, like memory reconsolidation, you're just not using drugs. Right? But it's the same process. My experience was the same internally as when I did do one of those experiences that he had before. So I thought that was beautiful. It was very, affirming of there's something deep going on here that I think is the key to help move our industry forward.

Yasmine And the whole one size is not going to fit everyone, that's the whole principle of why you're doing it.

Estefana It's not. has to be internal. You know, and anytime you share something with me, we listen autobiographically. So it's not because I'm not a good clinician, it's because I'm human. So how my brain works is, what you share with me, it needs to go through context of my experience to give it context, right? And with that comes judgments, it comes meaning, all of these things. As much, we could take all the culturally competent classes that we want, we're gonna get it wrong more than likely, right? Because oftentimes what the person is sharing, they don't even realise that that's not all of it. You know, they don't even realise the depth or the complexity of why they do what they do. So they're already giving us bits and pieces, and then we further chop that down within the context of what we understand or our experience. And that's where I think there's limitations in our field. So with CMI, it's a very internal journey. There's minimal information that I get from clients, because I don't want to misguide or mislead, you know, in a direction of like, what is my agenda and not what they're looking for. So if a person comes in with a certain thing, a therapist might be like, oh, that's got to be attachment issues. How do you know that's where it came from? How do you know that this specific behaviour or struggle doesn't have to do with something else other than attachment? Because there's a possibility. That's why we call it critical memories, because there's experiences that may or may not be traumatic, may or not have explicit association to it, like it might not be logical, but as the process unravels, after the fact it makes sense, you're like oh, that's what the brain was doing. But you don't know that before. So you have to stay open and curious.

Yasmine Yeah. I'm really interested to know what your parents make of all of this, given their background. This sort of thing is probably the reason for coming to the States, to give you

the future that perhaps they could never achieve. What kind of conversations do you have about the work you do?

Estefana So my mom has no idea. She can't grasp it. I laugh, because I was on Telemundo this weekend, and Telemundo is like a very popular Mexican channel. And the first time I made it to Telemundo I told her, I didn't know it would happen again. And she was like, oh, I'll watch it later. Like it was not, I'm like, can you not see me? She has no idea. I mean, this woman has a third grade education. All she cares about is you need to learn how to wash dishes and cook food, right? My father, they're very religious, right? And so they believed that women should be submissive. I was raised in a cult, so was not allowed to cut my hair or wear pants. You know, I supposed to wear dresses, not have an opinion. I mean, the complete opposite of everything that I am. And I know he very much, we had a good relationship, but I wasn't who I was supposed to be. So it led me to a rebellious period where he didn't speak to me for like six months, because I went to college. How dare I go to college? You know, that was just betraying everything that he was teaching me to be. That was around 19 years old. As I got older and I kind of told him, this is who I am, either take it or leave it, we formed a closer bond than any of my siblings. And I know the pivotal moment came, I lost him five years ago. So you know, if I get a little emotional, I think it's been about five years, but I'm so grateful for him. It's such a beautiful thing, because I'm not sad about it. I'm proud and I'm happy. My heart bursts with that, because about two years before he passed, so he's in his seventies and this man was still building rock walls up until like the week he passed, or at least right before he went into the hospital. Yeah, he was like, I'm telling you, this is one of the toughest men that I've ever met in my life. He taught me how to be tough. He taught me how to have integrity, do what you believe even if it goes against what other people believe. But I remember a moment when I would share things that I'm doing, and he didn't get it. He didn't understand. But at 75 he said miha, what do I need to do so that I could do what you do? I want to be a therapist. And I said dad, you have to get your high school diploma. You barely have eighth grade. Okay, miha, can you help me with that? Then you have to get a bachelor's, then you have get master's.

Yasmine Oh, so beautiful.

Estefana And then in that, I knew that he saw me. I knew that he finally saw me. And that's all that matters.

Yasmine There was real respect there.

Estefana And that conversation, and I wrote a kid's book like in 2017 and published it. And about two weeks later, you know, he came up from New Mexico and he had this little notebook paper with his little chicken scratch that he wrote like a child, and he wrote his own version of the story of Paco and he's like, do you think I can make a book too? And yeah. So when you asked that, that's all of that came to mind is like, yeah, he sees me. Does he understand really? No, not in the context of what that is, but does he know what I do, who I am? Yeah. Yeah, and that I carry with me. Yeah, because, you know, long after now that he's gone, I know that I was able to be me and he was able to be he. And that is, I wish that for everyone to be able to get to that place of connection. It doesn't come without a fight. It doesn't come without you learning to be authentic and disrupting sometimes those connections, breaking down, because how it was built originally was not your authentic self. So there's a process that you have to go through and it's painful. And a lot of people avoid it because it's there's no guarantee at the end. There's no guarantee that even after all that it's going to be repairable. So to me, that's you know, it's just it's just a beautiful thing that I got that gift from him. So yeah, I honour him.

Yasmien I think what you're hinting to, is it's not just that connection, I think it's a real acceptance which you hadn't experienced before. And I think what you're able to do is normalise a lot of that language. How to have difficult conversations, have people sitting with discomfort. Whereas previously maybe that was no, no, no, that's too hard. We don't talk about that. That's not something we acknowledge.

Estefana Yeah. Reject you because they don't know this version of you. You know, so there's a rejection, there's a disruption, a disconnection, but you have to persist. And I had my whole journey with the religious trauma, the whole other like, probably 10 episodes, but it was this thing with thing that says, this is not who you are. But it's so terrifying to walk away from what you know and what you believe to be true. And you add to that the threat of, you know, how we do in religion sometimes it, I very much appreciate that younger self that went through that, that left everything, that without guarantee that it was going to be any better on the other side, that I was going to find myself. But I would rather die than to continue surviving as someone that I'm not. It was a conviction that came from somewhere. And I'm so glad I followed it because it, again, I didn't ever try. My dad still had his beliefs and I respected them, and I had mine and he respected mine. So, you know, we'd kind of joke around about it and that's how we got through. But that was, I think that's the only way to love is authentically. You can't fully love somebody that does not fully show themselves. You know, I want to see your dark parts too so I can love you more fully.

Yasmine Yeah. I'm really hearing that you found a lot of your work ethics from your parents. They worked their butts off and they were also incredibly courageous to move to a new country, to take on the unknown. So that's something that I think has flowed through to you as well. You were a social worker before you even knew what social work meant.

Estefana Yeah.

Yasmine But you had that incredible foundation of supportive colleagues, supportive workplaces it sounds like, where you could just foster that interest and passion. Now you're providing clinical training to other people and hopefully other people will want to provide therapy to other people.

Estefana Yeah, I want to like just correct one thing. I had supportive people along the way, but I also had the irritants, the pushers, the ones that test you. I had, you know, becoming a bachelor level therapist was not comfortable, because there was other clinicians who went and got their master's and felt I did not deserve the same position they had, right. That was a fight, Yasmine, that was a battle where to the point that, I mean, it was torturous. You know, they would tell kids like, don't listen to her. Tell Stef she's not a real therapist. I got taken to court to prove my incompetence. There was a kid I had from a third world country that they assigned to me because I did the best with those reactive attachment disorder kids, the kids with that diagnosis. And the attorney took me to court to prove that I was incompetent and demand that they give them a doctor level therapist. Not a lot of people have gone through that. So it doesn't come just with the support, it comes with the challenge, but each challenge allowed me to grow, to stand more in my truth. And that one case, by the way, that attorney became my like number one referral source later on, because that kid refused to move and he did well with me, you know? But I don't want you to think that you need all the support. You need to understand what to do with the adversity. The support is great, but I promise you the adversity outnumbered the support at every which angle, but you have to decide who you're going to be and commit to that. And then that's how you get through all the adversity and the lack of support and the lack of understanding. And you find a way. You become like water. You're going to go, you're going to

stop me from, I'm going to go left. I'm going to go underneath. I'm going to go to the right. But somehow I'm going to get this done because life won't be life without it. Like, there's a purpose. So don't think anyone who's listening and says, well, it's because you have the support. No, honey, it's because I became my own support.

Yasmine Yeah. And they activated that rage switch. It was game on.

Estefana It sure did. I was like, I'm going to figure out a way, you know, just because you tell me I won't. But it comes also, I think, that depth of pain. When you face the monster yourself and you're familiar with it, you can face it with someone else. But when we avoid it, we're afraid of it, fear is the number one killer of purpose and passion. And you have to learn to do it afraid. You have to make your passion bigger than your fear. And you have to know that you're going to screw it up. You're going to do the worst possible job the first time. But you're going to learn from it, and you're going to get better at it. And you keep going. And you keep going. And you clean up. And you do it again. And each time, you're going to figure out over time.

Yasmine This is so incredible, and I feel like we could talk for hours, but is there anything else before we finish up, because I'm mindful of your time, anything we didn't get a chance to talk about, anything about your experience that you wanted to highlight?

Estefana I guess, you know, this is a social work podcast. So I know there's a lot of, you know, when I talk to young social workers that are interns or in the field, and they have that not enough or the thinking that, you have brilliance to bring. Follow your heart, follow your passion and know that the only right way to do things is the authentic way. When you come with caring and you come with the right mindset, be open to screwing it up. You know, I often told clients, hey, I'm human like you. So if I got it wrong, let me know. Cause my role is just to put it on the table. We try this. If it doesn't fit, let's throw it out and find the one that fits. So you have to be willing to do that. But if you're not compassionate with yourself, there's no way you will ever learn to fully be compassionate with another. So as you go through your journey, to me, the imposter syndrome is a lack of compassion for the self. You have unrealistic expectations of you as a human being. So if there was anything in my message, would be to start with being curious about your journey, starting to acknowledge that whatever you had to do to survive was necessary in the context of things. Start appreciating your experience and your journey. Be open to the wisdom that it brings you, and you're gonna rock it. You will find yourself going further than you ever imagined. Don't ever forget to appreciate you first, to love you first, to have compassion for you first, and then it will just start flowing from you outside.

Yasmine And that's a wrap on this TED talk. I feel like we need to give you another platform. Thank you so, so much for all of this. You are the analogy queen and I love that that's scattered all throughout. But thanks again for sharing your experience, and it's been incredibly rewarding for you from the sounds of things, but it hasn't been easy. You're fighting the good fight. You're fighting for what needs to happen. It's so wonderful, and thank you so much for sharing this. I look forward to seeing where it takes you next.

Estefana Thank you, Yasmine. And I hope to see you there jumping with me too.

Yasmine I'll do what I can. Yeah, yeah. Hopefully this just inspires more people either to start studying social work or to change direction or just to think about things in a different way. That's the whole point.

Estefana Yes. Thank you so much for having me. I so honour the time that you've spent with me, and it's so beautiful to be across the world from each other and connecting. So I just, I really want to take a moment and thank you so deeply from the bottom of my heart for that, for taking the time and space for this.

Yasmine No worries. Thank you so much.

Thanks for joining me this week. If you would like to continue this discussion or ask anything of either myself or Estefana, please visit my Anchor page at anchor.fm/socialworkspotlight, you can find me on Facebook, Instagram and Blue Sky or you can email swspotlightpodcast@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you.

Next episode's guests are Liz and Courtney, friends and fellow podcasters from the US. Courtney in Louisiana specialises in the intersection of substance use and justice-involved communities, having worked in criminal justice, crisis and emergency services. Liz in Kentucky has a particular passion for working with women and girls who are survivors of sexual violence on issues related to trauma, abuse and self-esteem, and is also a social work educator. Together they host the podcast Social Work Squad Cast, which they started as a way of maintaining contact with each other and fellow social workers, making sense of the changing professional landscape in the US and beyond, and to keep abreast of all things Beyonce.

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