

Episode 51: Nercy

Hi and welcome to Social Work Spotlight, where I showcase different areas of the profession each episode. I'm your host, Yasmine McKee-Wright, and today's guest is Nercy. Nercy is a clinical Social Worker with over 15 years' experience in supportive mental health services. She has worked in a diverse range of clinical fields including providing community Mental Health services to marginalised families in inner-city Los Angeles, specialised support services for refugee communities in Sydney's South West, and more recently providing solution focused counselling in the EAP wellbeing space. She has experience in providing individual, group and family therapy, as well as facilitating professional development workshops. Nercy strives to deliver client-centred, culturally competent, strengths-based interventions.

Yasmine Thanks so much, Nercy, for coming on to the podcast. Really lovely to meet with you and have a chat with you about your diverse work experience to date.

Nercy Thank you. I'm really happy to be here today and to be able to have a chat with you about it.

Yasmine Yeah. Can I ask firstly, when you started as a social worker, and what drew you to the profession?

Nercy So I want to take a moment to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land on which I stand on today, which is Dharawal country. And I just want to acknowledge that this is and always will be Aboriginal country. So thank you, thank you for the opportunity. And my respect to all the First Nations people of this land. My profession, I mean I sort of got a start in the social service field back in 2001, when I was introduced to, I started doing like a university internship at an organisation called Alexandria House, and I was working as a university intern there. And that was my first introduction to doing social service. Alexandria House is, it's a transitional shelter housing for women and children in Los Angeles. And so I arrived as an intern, and I started doing like a team program facilitator. And that was my first introduction to working with young people. And then eventually, I mean, I ended up staying with Alexandria House and being affiliated with them for about, I would say 10 plus years after that. And that was my start. From there and led to many different other experiences of working in like homeless shelters, homeless services, before I decided to then go back to school and get my Masters degree in 2007 to make it, sort of obtain that formal title of social worker. And through that, I think, ultimately my introduction to the field was really doing internship, having internship and volunteer opportunities that led me to the path I am today.

Yasmine Amazing. Was there something about your upbringing, or your high school experience or anything that made you want to go into the helping professions, do you think?

Nercy Yeah, actually it did start in high school. So I was really fortunate that from high school I had an idea, but I think it put me on the path of what I wanted to do in terms of profession. And I recognise that that's not always the case for all young people. And that's totally okay to go through different phases of trying to figure out what it is that you want to do with your career, and that some people even go through different career changes. But for myself, what happened was I was in high school, and I grew up in, it was a working class immigrant community in Los Angeles in San Fernando Valley, and I witnessed several young people, like my friends, some of them who went on to do great things with their lives, and some other young people who weren't so fortunate and ended up getting into trouble. And I think witnessing that put me on a path of wanting to do something to help young people. And originally I thought what that meant, because I had some friends who were on probation, that I thought I wanted to be a probation officer. To be the cool probation officer, to give these young people a chance. And when I went into university, you know I started with criminology with my associates degree. And it was, I think, through exposure to law enforcement, while I respect the law enforcement profession, I think what it did for me was, I started volunteering in the juvenile hall centers on the weekends, and I started working with incarcerated youth at that time for a brief period, just doing volunteer work. And while I got that exposure, it made it clear to me that I still wanted to help young people, but it probably needed to happen in a different way. And I wasn't exactly sure what that was gonna be, but I was committed to the fact that I wanted to work with young people, and I needed to figure out how that was going to be. So I then decided I'm gonna just engage in as many volunteer and internships opportunities as I can, at least over the next four years while I finish up university to put me on that path. And I think as I mentioned earlier with Alexandria House and my introduction with young people there, in some other work, it just became clear to me that, because I also worked with adults, it became clear to me that at that time, my resources were going to best be focused on trying to work with children and adolescents. And so it was through university, once I went to get my masters that I did some internships there, starting off with what I didn't think I wanted to do, which was doing therapy with adolescents. And I thought, I'm gonna give this a go, I'm not sure that this is it, because at the time I thought macro work might be better suited for me. And what I mean by macro work is doing more like policy, working in policy or doing more like organisational change, that sort of thing. But it was through that internship and doing therapy with adolescents that it seemed like a strength for me, I enjoyed it. And I finished that internship up and then went to work with a sort of policy

government organisation. And through that, it made it clear to me where my, where my strengths lie, and I think that was doing the individual work versus the macro work. So I started to then focus on doing more individual work. And it was through that exposure that I realised that I wanted to do one on one therapy with young people specifically. And over time, I started to also support their parents and so on. So yeah, I think sort of might have ventured off a little bit there, but I hope that answered the question a bit.

Yasmine Yeah, I think it's remarkable at such a young age, you had so much social awareness. You know, you could see disadvantage, you could see privilege, you could see what was happening around you in the community and you wanted to do something about it. Where most people who are in high school were just worried about getting through day to day. So I think that's incredible that you had that insight and foresight, and it drove you to be that motivated to go on and continue with your study. I'm really curious, though, and it may just be a difference between the Australian system and the American system, but what was it about formalising that study for you in getting the social work degree, the Masters degree, that was so important to you? What was it that you couldn't do with your undergraduate degree, do you think?

Nercy Yeah, I think, so in the States social work, it's become quite a bit of a more formalised profession. And when I say that, kind of like the way that you would see psychology here in Australia, right, where there are certain degrees and the level of experience that you have to attain before you can refer to yourself as a psychologist, I think the same is with social work, right? Except that in the States, as the years went on, you really, you wouldn't refer to yourself as a social worker formally unless you obtain the degree of social work, right? And so prior to me getting my Masters degree in social work, while I was doing some work in the community, I had some skills and some tools, but I think to really do some more profound work I really needed to obtain some additional training and insight and knowledge that I didn't have at that time. And look, that could have been obtained either through work experience perhaps, but at that time I was 24, 25 years old and you know, it was going to be a few years before I was able to obtain that work experience. So the natural next step felt like, let me go back to school, and maybe it's through that training that I'll be able to get that additional insight. And honestly that was the best thing I could have done for myself. Because while University, the four year degree really helped set me on my path, it was through the Masters degree program that I was able to really obtain the skills and the tools to do the work that I'm doing to this day. Like it really shifted my mindset and how I work and the strategies that I use and really, yeah, helped prepare me to provide clients with interventions that were gonna I think be longer term. Not that before, it wasn't important, because I don't want to minimise anyone's work experience, either that if you don't have the educational background that you can't be prepared. You can be, but I think for me at

that point in time that's what I needed to also give me more confidence to assist clients. Because it, like I said earlier, just gave me the tools to help prepare them so that they can then have the confidence, for young people at least to go out and make some meaningful change. Long term meaningful change. And that's what my commitment was at that time, was, I don't want to just see immediate change. But I want to be able to incite long term change as well.

Yasmine That's really beautiful. So you've worked in women and children shelters, you've also done quite a few roles in working with younger people even, like preschool mental health and adolescent trauma. Can you tell me what that was all about, that experience before you came to Australia?

Nercy Yeah, so I primarily worked in community mental health. So mental health in the US, specifically Los Angeles, works a bit different than it would in Australia, where we're really fortunate in Australia to have access to basic health care, like mental health services, right? In Los Angeles unfortunately, that's not always the experience. However, there are resources available to the community who may not be able to afford a private psychologist or a private clinical social worker. And so what I did was I worked in community mental health. And you know, it was an affordable, oftentimes free resource that would be available to children and families. But oftentimes, it was the families that were referred to us, were referred either by court order, by child protection services, sometimes voluntarily too, but it was oftentimes coming from a traumatic situation. Because there was a traumatic occurrence that happened to the child or within the family or in the community, and so they then sought out mental health counselling. And what I encountered was that most of the families I encountered weren't just dealing with one traumatic situation, but came from quite complex trauma backgrounds. Because in Los Angeles there's a huge immigrant population, specifically from Central and South America and Mexico as well. And, you know, we're thinking about people, immigrant communities, refugee background, impoverished, working class families, community violence, family violence. So there's a lot of factors here at play that can influence how someone ends up seeking counselling support there. And that, yeah, that's how we stepped into ... I did do, for some time, I would do assessments for children that were taken into foster care and removed from their family. I also did school counselling for some time, where there was a wonderful program, the Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation that runs Margaret's Place in schools. And this was a centre within schools that would provide counselling services, that was a violence prevention and intervention program. So part of the intervention was doing counselling support with the kids in schools as well.

Yasmine So it sounds like a lot of the clientele were people who were already enmeshed in a big way in multiple systems. So part of your role as a social worker could be helping them to navigate that, and also to help them hopefully remove some of those layers of complexity.

Nercy Yeah, yeah, that's right. Because there's a lot of factors that are at play here, right? The first is, is assessing with the client what they think their needs are, right? Because you want to be able to allow the person to determine what their needs are. And sometimes that started with basic needs, such as housing, food and shelter.

Yasmine Yeah.

Nercy Right. And then from there, once you can stabilise that, then it will go on to, you know, what's happening for you right now. And oftentimes it will be PTSD related symptoms, because of whatever trauma they've experienced in their lives. And then trying to bring some stability back so that they can go on and function with their day to day obligations, like going to school, going to work, partaking in social settings with family members, with friends, and yeah, being able to go on and carry on with life despite of these barriers or obstacles that they've encountered in their early or young adulthood.

Yasmine Yeah. So tell me about how you ended up in Australia and how you found that transition. Obviously, it's a big thing just to move from one country to the next. But to try to find your feet in a profession in a different country is a whole new challenge.

Nercy It is. Yeah. So I ended up moving to Australia because my husband, he's Australian. And so we got married, and I ended up moving here in 2015. I was very fortunate, though, in the sense that I was, you know, unlike some other people's circumstances I was fortunate in that I could make the decision to migrate to Australia. Right? Some people like, with people from disadvantaged communities that I've worked in, oftentimes I recognise that, you know, people might have to migrate for many other different reasons, sometimes not by choice. And so I want to acknowledge my privilege in that sense, that I was able to come to Australia willingly. And also, you know, be able to create a path for myself that I was able to obtain permanent residency quite quickly. So yeah, but besides that, yeah, once I did arrive in Australia, I think I was grateful to know that, like social work is, you know, is a recognised profession here. And in fact, what helped me in my migration process here was that there was a need for social workers in Australia. So I was able to obtain a permanent residency via the skilled worker visa, because there's a need for social workers. So I think that some important information for anyone wishing to move from overseas to Australia, is that there's a

need for that. So that really made my visa process a lot easier. But once I did get settled in and start looking for work, it did feel like having to learn a whole new system all over again. Fortunately, with experience, and with time, I've been able to adapt that information and what it means to work with young people here, like understanding the school systems, understanding the mental health systems, and so on. But it did set me back I think, it took me about a year to really settle into the workforce, to really understand and become familiar with how mental health works here.

Yasmine Yeah.

Nercy Yeah, yeah. So it took a bit of time, but I got there. And I think, you know, six years on, I'm definitely there and feel much more comfortable and settled in my role as a social worker here in Australia.

Yasmine So what's led you to this point in your career? How did your trajectory within Australia look?

Nercy Yeah, so I started doing some consultation work when I first moved here early on, and that lasted for a few months. And I think doing that sort of like, when I did my internships, I recognised that while I was trying to do something different, and this happens each time that, when I try to do something different outside of direct services with clients, I always end up coming back to it, because I recognise where my strengths lie, and that's doing direct work with people. I like it, I have a passion for it. And then the few months that I didn't work, when I first moved here to Australia, there was a slight emptiness there. I wasn't sure what it was, but it felt like I missed the people interaction and just being able to be present with people. And I, I'm intrigued, and I like listening to people's stories and witnessing their experiences. And I, it's really fulfilling, I appreciate it. And I love what I do. And so after doing that brief consultation work, then I ended up doing direct counselling services for young people, for children and adolescents with STARTTS working with refugee youth in the school communities, and also like, you know, at the STARTTS office. And that was great too, because having that role felt almost like a full circle for me, because my parents are of refugee background. And that's how they ended up migrating to the US and having me there. And so I was quite familiar with the refugee experience through them. And so coming to Australia, and coming to work with young people of refugee background here just really helped normalise, I think some of the experiences I had as a young person myself, but also being able to provide them with a support that maybe, you know, wasn't available at that time through no one's fault. Because, you know, it was the 80s, which shows my age at this point, but it was the 80s. And you know, there wasn't much information, maybe not as much like support available at that time. You know, with the Civil War in El Salvador

kicking off like in the late 70s, early 80s and large migration of Salvadorian people and people from Central America arriving in the US. And I think over time the services built up but it was really great to arrive here and to see that there was a service like this already in place and to be able to support people through that phase of being the children of refugees or being refugee themselves and providing that support that they needed at the time.

Yasmine Wow. Did that prompt any conversations for you? Did you kind of get home from work one day and just have to talk to your parents about that whole experience and the parallels between what you'd experienced? I just feel like there's such an opportunity there to unpack so much.

Nercy Yeah, I think it certainly made me reflect a lot of my experiences or like witnessing, I think the adjustments that my parents had to go through and just being exposed to war trauma, right? And also like grieving subsequent losses from that. And then also being in this new country and having to adjust to a whole new culture. And then me being sort of like, having this culture, like Salvadorian culture, but also trying to merge it with American culture. And seeing that exact same experience playing out for some young people here was just like really fascinating for me, but also gave me I think that insight to understand what was happening for them, to be able to support them through that and to normalise what was happening for them, that they weren't alone in the process. And yeah, I think, I don't know if there was much unpacking because I think that my parents, you know, they've both coped with what happened in the past differently. But I think it certainly helped me understand what they experienced as young parents raising children in a whole new different country. And that really gave me like a different understanding and appreciation for all the sacrifices they had to make and how challenging it was for them, as it was for me.

Yasmine Yeah, absolutely. How did you then end up where you are now? What's your current role? And what does a typical day look like for you?

Nercy Yeah, so my current role is a bit different now, because now I'm working with adults, which was a shift for me. But I think after, you know, working with young people also involved, I would say, a number of sessions that I did parenting support. And in addition to parenting support, my last role also involved supporting young adults. And I really liked that. So I thought, you know, I might be ready for the next step to take on a sort of new population. And I've been working with adults. And so what I do now, I would say, yeah over the past year I've taken on the role as an EAP clinician. And EAP stands for the Employee Assistance Program. And the Employee Assistance Program is a program that's offered by most, most employers, but I think it's often, can sometimes

be glossed over in like induction, or you know, briefings that happened with HR. But I actually have a deep appreciation for this program. Because for people who may not be familiar with the Employee Assistance Program, it's a program that's often provided by your employer. And if you're not sure, you should inquire with your manager or HR to see if they do have an EAP provider. And what it is, it's a free mental health support that could be accessed by employees. And it's confidential, it's free, you can access it quite quickly, except that it's brief. So it is a brief service in that, you know, only a few number of sessions are offered. But it can be brief enough that it could, it sometimes can be enough to meet whatever challenge you may bring to the table. And also, just to be clear, even though that it is a service that you access through your employer, it's confidential. So your employer wouldn't be notified that you've accessed it unless you've told your employer that you would, but it could be confidential. And like I said, it's free. And I would encourage anyone who has access to it, that if you need that support, that this is an avenue that you can pursue. You can bring whatever issue is on your mind. So it doesn't have to be work related. It could be a personal matter as well. And that's the bit that I appreciate about it, that it's quite diverse in the range of topics that people present with. And I like that. Yeah, it provides for some interesting sessions. And I think it keeps me on my feet to constantly be thinking about new interventions to try to support people. Yeah.

Yasmine Have there been many changes in uptake since COVID and working from home and all those sorts of things have been around? Have you noticed that people are needing or accessing support more?

Nercy Yeah. Absolutely, I think COVID has had an impact on that, where people are needing more support. Because, you know, aside from COVID being a pandemic, you know, a terrible pandemic is that there is other fallout from COVID, right, and COVID restrictions. And that's, I think the isolation that it's led to for a lot of people, or it's the break from routine that people had. Or it's made people have to reframe the way that they look at self care. Because for us, oftentimes, I know for myself, self care looks like activities that I would do externally outside of home or with other people, you know. It's catching up with friends, going out to dinner, or getting, you know, my hair done and things like that. Right? But now, that looks different. And I think that there's been lots of conversations happening around like, it's not that you're not engaging in self care, it's just that it's having a look a bit different these days. And so what can you know, what can we identify in terms of strategies for self care? So certainly COVID has had an impact on that. And that's even more reason why I would encourage people to seek the EAP service if they're finding themselves identifying what some of the challenges or fall out of COVID? Or, yeah, it's quite complex, especially I think, people who've been isolated who haven't been able to have much contact with people outside of you know,

themselves, or people who live in the home with them. That longing for connection and touch is real, and valid. And it'd be good to talk to somebody about it.

Yasmine Yeah. And I assume you don't have to go into an office or a clinic to access the service.

Nercy No it's, you can do it by video, phone, at least yeah, through my role, you can access it through video phone sessions, you know. Depending on where you're at you might still be able to offer access via face to face. But I know in the New South Wales area you could access certainly by phone. So and I think phone's been a great option for people who may, you know, not be able to, let's say, don't have all the time to, you know, leave work, travel somewhere and then access therapy, that you can actually do it by phone. It could happen during your lunch break, or in the morning before work, or if you finish up work a little bit early, then you can do it last thing before you wrap up your day. So it's certainly accessible through different means.

Yasmine Yeah, great. I imagine the makeup of the staff who provide this support would be a lot of psychologists. Are there a lot of social workers, and other any other professions that you notice that have really found their place within this work?

Nercy Yeah. Psychologists and social workers certainly. I think that's the primary profession that I've seen represented in the area. Yeah. And I'm always advocating for social workers. Because going back to one of your questions, I think finding my way as a social worker here in Australia, I think that there's still maybe some perceptions about social workers in the community still of what a social worker is. Because I know I get that question often, like you're a social worker, well how do you compare to a psychologist? And I want to say that we work similar in many ways, but we're also quite different, right? And I think that for many years social workers had this stigma of like the people who come and take your babies from home, right? And I think we've worked really hard to sort of address some of those perceptions of us, in that we social workers can engage in many different roles and work with many different populations and do many different things. And so, in my case, right, I'm a therapist, I'm a clinician and a counsellor. So you know, whichever way you want to see it, but I think ultimately, what I do is I work with people to help and assist them in navigating some life conflicts that may come up and try to provide them with some strategies to overcome some of those challenges.

Yasmine That's a great elevator pitch.

Nercy Yeah.

Yasmine It's interesting, you mentioned earlier your background and interest in criminology, because that's something I've noticed more recently, is that they're offering dual degrees in criminology and social work, or people going from studying criminology to social work or vice versa. It just seems to be a very common field of interest for social workers or co-studystudy. Why do you think that is, or why might that have been specifically for you?

Nercy I think for me early on, at least in high school, I thought that that was really my limit in my limited knowledge of helping people. I thought that, you know, my understanding of service providers in the community were that one way to have access to young people, to be able to help them, was going to be through law enforcement. And it was only through work experience that I realised that there's many other different ways that you could work to support young people and people from disadvantaged communities. And that became apparent to me quite early on, I think, in my university studies. While I was doing my criminology degree I went on a ride along with highway patrol in California and that was quite interesting. And, and then, you know, while going to juvenile hall on Sundays and volunteering there, and being around other law enforcement people there, it was good insight to have, but I think for me, it also made clear that I was interested in being an advocate. I wanted to be an advocate for the needs that people, whether it's, you know, parents or young people were lacking, and trying to be an advocate for them to access these resources, so that they could overcome some of the challenges that they had encountered. Because sometimes even with trauma experiences, right, in order to be able to heal from that trauma, if there's no access to resources, sometimes it's gonna be really hard to overcome that trauma. And in some cases, people might find themselves in this kind of consistent pattern of not being able to get out of this trauma space. And I think that sometimes that's because there is a lack of resources that are available to them to uplift them, so that they can then do the work to heal. Yeah.

Yasmine Sounds like there are so many things you enjoy about the work that you do, and you're really passionate about it, but what would you say you love most about the work you're doing at the moment?

Nercy Oh, yeah, that's, that's a hard one only because it's hard to specify the one aspect I like about my work. I don't know if this is general or specific, but I will say, being present for people. Being present for them so that, you know, what I tell people sometimes is that I'm the facilitator. What I see myself as a facilitator for that internal discussion to be taking place so that you can come to the solutions. I might, you know, put some words here and there or, you know, some direction here and there. But

ultimately I'm the facilitator so that you can come up with the solutions and the answers. To me, I appreciate when I see that growth happening, that they've come to their aha moment, or that oh yeah, you know, being able to help a person get to a space where they can recognise their strengths and their resilience. Because oftentimes, when a person may come to me, they may come to me with, they're in a space of not being able to recognise their strengths, or finding themselves in a tough position that it's difficult to identify what tools they already do have. And so for me, yeah, it's just being able to be the facilitator here.

Yasmine Yeah.

Nercy Yeah. And I like working with people. I'm passionate about that. I use the word advocate, again. That's important to me, because human rights are important to me. And when I say human rights, it's being able to live your life with access to resources. Yeah, and being given the same opportunities as everyone else around you so that you could live a meaningful and healthy life.

Yasmine So other than continually seeing people that don't have access to those resources, what do you find most difficult? What's really challenging for you?

Nercy Yeah, for me, the most challenging bit I think, is when working with disadvantaged communities, it's the lack of resources that could exist sometimes that we sometimes have to, especially when working with people with complex traumas we sometimes find ourselves having to work from like, with a sort of brief treatment space. And I think that that sort of brief treatment modality, while it works might work for some people, it doesn't work for everyone. And yeah, services can sometimes be limited. And I think that sometimes what works for one person might not work for the next. And I think that when it comes to allocating the funding to provide services to people of disadvantaged backgrounds, I wish that it was much more abundant so that we can give them all the support they need until they're ready to move on. Granted, I do want to acknowledge that some people, you know, there's this approach, you also don't want to hold on to clients forever. So I'm very conscious of that too, but I do still think and acknowledge that some people do need that extra longer term support. And sometimes because resources are limited that's not always possible. And I think that that's a small setback. I think in the profession that, yeah, that there was all the money available to provide everyone with mental health support for as long as they needed it.

Yasmine Yeah. That's your magic wand.

Nercy Yeah, yeah, that's, I guess, in short terms. Yeah, that's it.

Yasmine It's so interesting to me, because I know that in that context you were just talking about, those migrant and refugee populations or people in disadvantaged communities, but I see so many parallels between that work and the work you're doing right now. Even if you just think from a really simplistic perspective, you have only a certain number of sessions with someone. So you're having to work with them to do that brief session therapy, that solution focused probably because sometimes, you just can't, you have to contain certain issues. So how do you grapple with that? And do you have good services that you can then hand people over to if they need ongoing support?

Nercy Yeah, it's, that's a good question. I think that certainly I utilise clinical supervision as a way to be able to assess these situations when they do encounter them. And I want to highlight that, because while I've been in the profession for 15 years plus, I still am learning. I'm constantly learning and I'm constantly seeking feedback from, you know, the appropriate supervisors, because I think there's always opportunity for growth, right? And so, when I do have to contain it though, what I do say is, I think even one or two sessions before we might be wrapping things up, I'm encouraging the client to start to consider like what other external resources might be available for them. Often the start is to go to your GP, right, and discuss with your GP what's been happening for you, obtain a referral to an external service provider. So that's one approach, right? But sometimes that might not be enough of an approach, right? So it's also sitting with a client to identify what other resources might be available to them, but also empowering the client to ensure that they can follow up the resources and having that follow up session to see what the outcome of accessing those resources are. Part of the therapy process is also I think, you know, as social workers, even though we might be engaged as clinical therapists, we still find ourselves doing case management from time to time, right? That's a huge part of our profession still. And so it's ensuring that you can identify some resources with the client, empowering them to follow it up, and then yeah, hopefully having an outcome in which they've been able to follow through and that that link has taken place. And oftentimes it does. I think when people are ready and motivated to participate in services they will follow through, and they'll be able to empower themselves to ensure that that longer term support takes place.

Yasmine Yeah. I get the impression that there are some really great opportunities for good planning, like you've just mentioned. So you can actually put together plans and almost an agreement with someone that they're going to do a certain number of sessions, and this is what things are going to focus on. And then one or two sessions beforehand you can start to wrap things up and get them used to the idea of you can do this. But so many times if you're working with someone, say in the community or you're working with someone who's an inpatient in a hospital, you've also got that opportunity

to say I know that you're going to be here tomorrow. So here's how we're going to continue working together. There must be times in the work that you're doing where people just don't come back. And it's nothing to do with you or the service that you're providing, but something else is going on in their lives and you've had those couple of sessions with someone and then that's it. So I'm thinking if I was in this role, that be a lot of try to do as much as you can in one session without overwhelming someone. And that would be really hard for me in terms of the support that I need to be able to do that. Do you find that difficult? Do you have good support around that?

Nercy Yeah, I do. I do have good support around it. And I've been able to find some good support around it now, right? And I think it's being able to, again, talk to clinical consultants and managers about it. But certainly, I think, as a human, and as someone who really cares about their clients, because I think no matter how brief our interactions may be, I am quite compassionate when it comes to working with clients. And I'm really thorough, because I care about who I work with, right? And so those challenges can present themselves from time to time in which perhaps that outcome, that desired outcome hasn't happened in the time slot that you're given. And I, at times will do my own case review in terms of what have I done? What haven't I been able to do? What were the contributors to the outcome that maybe you know, were external to me? Also being able to consult about it either with a supervisor or a trusted colleague on is there something else that I could have done? And, yeah, I think that that's the part that I referenced earlier about constantly learning, because in consultation, sometimes you could get the insight like to help you think outside of the box. That may be like, I know, for me, sometimes I could get really one track, like on this track of this is where I'm headed. And sometimes you need to get off the track to look at other solutions, right, or see other potential outcomes. But certainly, that's a challenge I think that comes in with any population you might be working with, right? Where maybe, yeah, you might not hear back from them. And you might not know what's happened. And sometimes in some cases, there could be the follow up, you know, depending on what the organisation is, and if you can have the capacity to, is to follow up either by email or phone call and doing a brief check in to see if, you know, are you okay, and do you need additional support? Or have you been linked in somewhere else? And, you know, I think in those instances I actually get the feedback that I'm okay, actually, that's why I didn't get in contact. Or I'm doing better now, which, you know, what is the case? Or yes, I've been seeing somebody. Or sometimes it's really, I think the initial issues that they presented with that might be preventing them from accessing longer term support as well, which is a real thing, too.

Yasmine Yeah. Are there any other areas of social work that interest you? I know you've said initially you were interested in policy and that sort of organisational change,

but you really realised that your strength is in that face to face working with people and the direct professional stuff. But are you interested in returning to working with young people? Where do you see this taking you?

Nercy Yeah, absolutely. And I, you know, even through EAP, because it's a service that can also, sometimes through your company, the EAP services can be extended to family members as well. So I have the fortunate experience to also be able to still work with adolescents and young people sometimes. But yeah that's, I think that's always going to be a passion group for me. And, you know, one thing that I want to continue to incorporate in the work that I do is remaining an advocate for refugee communities, for the LGBTQI plus community as well, you know, immigrant communities, advocate for people of colour, women's rights. And so for me it's always, that's always gonna be at the forefront of the work I do, is being an advocate for human rights. Yeah, as I think I might have mentioned earlier, that's really important to me. And I think that's always going to be a huge aspect in the work that I do. And I'm hoping to continue to try to incorporate that in yeah, the clinical work that I do. I don't, I'm not sure what that'll lead me to in the future. I think, yeah, like I'm open to different experiences, and I'm open to learning and continuing to grow because that's the only way you really evolve as a human and as a professional, right? So but yeah, I think that link to young people will always be there. But yeah, yeah, that's where I'm at.

Yasmine Yeah, that's pretty common based on what other people tell me, is remaining open to those other experiences. And I think that talks to the diversity and the transferability of social work that you can just pick up a different kind of work and run with it. And yes, you have to learn the systems or you have to learn the legislation or the policy. But at the end of the day, it's about problem solving, it's about figuring out or helping the person to identify what the problem is, and how they think they can work towards fixing something or at least just engaging in a different way. So yeah, it sounds as though every piece of experience that you've picked up is just going to lead in a different and interesting place for you.

Nercy Yeah, it has, yeah. I've been, I've taken each and every role that I've done since 2001, since my internship at Alexandria House, has changed my life profoundly. And I mean that like wholeheartedly, is I've been really fortunate that each and every role I've had since then has really shaped me into the person I am today. And I want to say I'm a good person, I think I am. But it's really like, it's the experiences that I've had with the individuals that I've encountered has really had a profound impact on me. And it's been a huge reward in my life. Yeah, it's been really meaningful.

Yasmine I think that's partly why the social work professional identity is so strong, not just here but in other parts of the world, because you don't finish work at the end of the day and stop being a social worker. It is very much part of your very being, it's who you strive to be in every interaction that you have. So yeah, it's just reinforcing all these beautiful discussions that I have with people, is reinforcing that social work is a profession where the value is so important, the approach that people take, it's so different and so unique, I think, to many other professions. And I think it's really beautiful.

Nercy Yeah, absolutely. I think so. And it's, it's hard work. It's hard work. And I told a group of kids one day you don't become a millionaire doing it. You could maybe, but the reward in itself, it's invaluable. You can't put a price to that.

Yasmine Yeah, you're rich in experience.

Nercy Absolutely, yeah. Look, I haven't traveled the world as much as I would like to, like, I'm not a seasoned traveler like some of my fellow Aussies here. But through the work that I've done I've encountered so many different cultures that to me, would beat any travel experience, because of the insight that people have provided me into their culture, into their lives, into their family systems. And yeah, that's been pretty amazing to be able to have that sort of insight and experience. Yeah.

Yasmine Yeah. You've spoken a lot about solution focused approaches, and obviously there'd be trauma informed work there. But what do you think are some approaches that have most informed the work that you're doing?

Nercy Sure, yeah. You know, I'll go back to some old school approaches here. But I think because of the capacity in which I've had to work on with, you know, brief therapy modalities, just being able to provide sort of brief interventions. TFEBT really informed a lot of the work that I did, because it was brief, but it also worked to help address trauma for many young people. And what it also did was provide the opportunity to incorporate the engagement of parents to be able to utilise some of the intervention strategies that we were addressing within therapy, to also encourage the use of that at home. And yeah, doing community work, I think was really beneficial. So when I was at STARTTS I did a lot of work in the schools and working on a collaborative approach with the schools was really useful, because school is the other place where children spend the rest of their time at outside of home. And so if they can feel safe and supported in school, that was going to make a huge impact on their healing process. And so I think that that's something really important to take into account. And even today, when I engage parents for parenting support, I often ask them, you know, what's

been your engagement with the school, right? Or have you spoken to the school. Have you accessed any, you know, support through the school. Because there might be a challenge that the child's presenting with that is present at home and at school. But maybe these meetings haven't taken place, or the parent doesn't know that they can access, you know, additional support to the schools. I think school engagement's really important. But yeah, in terms of other modalities, I think, you know, solution focused based therapy, that's been really useful and getting clients to reflect on their strengths, what they've done positively to get them to the place they're at, and being able to draw on some of those strengths so that they can use that as a coping method to push forward. And sometimes yeah, I think going back to that sort of taking on that space of being a facilitator, it's facilitating a discussion to remind people of the strengths they're already in possession of. Because it's, people are much more, you know, they're the experts on themselves, right? And so, sometimes they already possess those tools, but it's about just highlighting that for them. So yeah I also, you know, in terms of grief, I utilise this beautiful program that I can't speak highly enough about through Good Grief. It's called Seasons for Growth. And that's, you know, I can't speak highly enough about that program. But that's a beautiful program that I've used with children and adolescents in schools, and that, it's a group based approach to yeah, help young people through the grief process. And being able to provide the space, a safe space for them to learn about their grief experiences, to be able to talk about it in a way that's non confrontational, but still have those in depth discussions. And then coming up with some coping strategies that help in the healing process. It's a beautiful program, highly recommend it for anyone who's supporting young people through loss. And loss doesn't, grief and loss doesn't have to be specific to death, it could be in relation to the loss of family members, like separating, so parents separating, so loss of their parents being together ...

Yasmine Loss of culture, even, with our migrant and refugee populations.

Nercy Absolutely, yeah. We use that a lot in working with children at STARTTS is, you know, loss of culture, loss of country. And there's lots of loss that young people, language, some kids will talk about food, because the food's really different here. So yeah, but having that space to talk about it. And knowing I'm not alone in my grief is really useful for young people. So highly recommended. Seasons for Growth, through Good Grief.

Yasmine Thank you, I'll put those in the show notes for anyone else who's interested.

Nercy Yeah.

Yasmine But it's always just so refreshing to speak with someone who's obviously incredibly passionate about what they do, but your focus on constantly being an advocate in whatever you do really shines through and supporting people to access resources to overcome whatever challenge they're facing. You're obviously hungry yourself for any challenge. So you want, you want to be faced with something difficult. You want people to come to you with something challenging, so that you can be that problem solver and access all of those resources internally and the knowledge base that you have, and the skills. But it's just obvious that you really care about people, which is fundamental to what we do. It's beautiful to listen to. It also highlights for me the importance of volunteering and thinking outside the box. Like all the different opportunities that you had when you were younger, to see what kind of work you were interested in or where social work could make a difference, or even just gaining valuable experience to, not necessarily to go and do social work with but to maybe do community service work or counselling in some capacity. Or even just work in community centres and just having the experience to say I understand this population and I have the skills to support us. So I can't speak highly enough about volunteering. And I'm glad that you shared your experience with that as well and how that informed the direction you took.

Nercy Yeah, absolutely. And I encourage anyone that's thinking about either getting into this field or is in this field and maybe thinking of exploring other aspects outside of the population you're already working with, that volunteer opportunities are the way to go. And sometimes can lead to employment as well, so there's a plus side of that. But it's yeah, it really does provide you with some invaluable experience that you might not get in the classroom.

Yasmine That's right.

Nercy Yeah.

Yasmine Is there anything else before we finish up that you wanted to talk about? Or just words of advice for people who are starting out in social work?

Nercy Yeah, I think, talk with other people you might know in the social work field. Volunteer or engage in, you know, internship opportunities, if it's available. Be willing to challenge yourself and to be vulnerable. I think that a degree of vulnerability in this field is required for growth. And keeping an open mind. I think that's really important as well, because we encounter so many different people from all walks of life and as social workers, and I think once we've obtained the educational background, there's a level of privilege that comes with that. That while we can do lots of good, it's important

to keep mindful that that privilege that we hold, because we don't want to use that as a means of instilling you know, our thoughts and our views onto other people. But that we're open minded to let people to be who they are so that we can support him as best as possible. That it's they who can hopefully be the guide on what they need, and that you can help support him in that process. Especially when it comes to working with young people, is giving them that autonomy to be able to be decision makers for themselves.

Yasmine Give them the skills and the confidence.

Nercy Yeah, absolutely. With support, of course. Yeah.

Yasmine Yeah, sure. This has been such an incredible discussion. Thank you so much Nercy for coming on to the podcast and for giving your time and yeah, just really grateful for the opportunity to do this.

Nercy My pleasure, Yasmine. Thank you for having me. It's been an absolute pleasure. And yeah, thanks so much for the opportunity.

Yasmine Thank you.

Thanks for joining me this week. If you would like to continue this discussion or ask anything of either myself or Nercy, please visit my Anchor page at anchor.fm/socialworkspotlight, you can find me on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter or you can email swspotlightpodcast@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you. Please also let me know if there is a particular topic you'd like discussed, or if you or another person you know would like to be featured on the show.

Next episode's guest is Mark, a Social Worker from Canada who has worked in the mental health space for the last 10 years in a range of roles including case management, clinical NDIS work, leadership roles as a team leader and program manager, and now owner of a private practice called Clarity Therapy, working mainly with youth and young adults.

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