

Social Work Ambassador

Biju Thomas, Inspire



Biju Thomas is a Home Manager with Inspire - Wellbeing for All (previously known as NIAMH). Inspire is a charity and social enterprise which focuses on promoting wellbeing for all through their mental health, intellectual and learning disability and professional wellbeing services. Biju has worked for Inspire for the past 4 years and is responsible for the management of

thirteen staff and sixteen residents in 15 Enterprise Court Bangor, a supported accommodation and flats for people with severe and enduring mental health problems.

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Have you always worked in social work?

After qualifying as a social worker in India in 1996, I worked with various human rights and development organisations until 2003. I had also obtained a Diploma in Labour Laws and Labour Welfare in India along with my social work studies

I then relocated to UK/NI in 2004. I worked with Threshold (a provider of specialist therapeutic services for children, adolescents, adults and older people who suffer from mental health problems) as a project worker in supported accommodation. This position helped me to learn more about the legislations, policies, procedures and practices within UK and Northern Ireland. I became a deputy manager with Threshold in 2007 and then in December 2013, I became manager with Inspire Mental Health. I have worked in the mental health sector for last 13 years, dealing with real lives and supporting people to make positive changes. As a social worker in mental health every day is different and every interaction is a learning opportunity.

Training to be a Social Worker

I completed my MA in Social Work from University of Pune, Maharashtra, India in May 1996. My voluntary experience with community development organisations and human rights organisations in India had motivated me to choose social work as a career option – as I wanted to make a difference and support people to change their lives. The MA was a full time course and involved practical work experience in hospital settings, field work experience, assignments and dissertations.

Professional development

I have completed all the Post qualifying (PQ) modules 1 to 6 in 2008, the Professional Supervision programme in Social Work in 2011, NVQ Level 4 Registered Manager’s award in 2009 and Level 3 award in assessing candidates (A1) in 2011.

I have worked within the voluntary sector throughout my career. The support I have received from the voluntary sector social work support group has been very useful; in helping me to develop my career progression and to provide clarity around my future professional development.

What would you say to someone considering a career in social work?

If you have the passion to help people, have positivity and a proactive approach – the social work profession is the right career for you.

Important values needed in this profession are; to have a non-judgemental attitude, be accountable, respectful, trustworthy and professional; be able to work in partnership, be anti-discriminatory and to value others. Values are very important because we are dealing with human lives and have to respond sensitively.

What challenges do you face in your job?

The mental health sector is facing a range of challenges on a regular basis. Managing emotions, while taking professional decisions; managing expectations and reality while working with individuals; listening and relating without judgement; managing and adapting to the cultural changes and negative consequences of positive risk taking are a few examples of the challenges facing social workers.

In what way is the social work profession rewarding?

Social Work is very satisfying as I am providing a service to the community and the people who live there – a service which supports people to make changes in their lives. The work involved and the progress made by people is very rewarding to be a part of. There are also opportunities for ongoing learning and development.

How do you see your career progressing?

I want to widen my experience within the sector and to undertake some doctoral studies about innovative participatory approaches in a mental health setting. I am also interested in undertaking further training in law and human rights.

What does it mean to work in a regulated profession and be registered with NISCC?

I initially registered as an Internationally Qualified Social Worker with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and then transferred my registration to NISCC in 2005.

Working in a regulated profession and being registered with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) means that I am accountable to my profession for my practice. I need to uphold and maintain the ethos, values, standards and professionalism in line with the standards of NISCC.

Why did you choose to become a Social Work Ambassador and what do you hope to gain from this role?

I hope my role as an Ambassador will motivate others to choose social work as a career. I also want to attract and inspire more young people within ethnic groups to consider the social work profession. Hopefully I will also be able to encourage other social workers within my team to consider becoming ambassadors.

