

Social Work Ambassador

Dawn Richardson, Salvation Army



Dawn Richardson is the Social Work Manager at Thorndale Family Centre. She is the Registered Manager for the Parenting Assessment Service within Thorndale which is managed by the Salvation Army – a voluntary sector organisation. Dawn has worked in Thorndale since 1995, initially as a Family Support Worker, before qualifying as a Social Worker in 2000. She then returned

to Thorndale and worked for several years as a qualified social worker before progressing to Team Leader in 2003 and then to Social Worker Manager in 2006.

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Have you always worked in social work?

During my school education I struggled with the career advice and choices on offer for university studies and courses. Against the advice of my school I decided to take a year out in order to gain some more experience and ascertain what areas I was more interested in. I applied to do some voluntary work and I also completed a HND in Health and Social Care which provided me with an insight into social care and social work practice. I worked for Barnardos, Sense, PACT (Parent and Child Together) Project, and Autism NI, gaining valuable experience over the two years of the HND.

Training to be a Social Worker

I was accepted on to a two year Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) course at Ulster University at Jordanstown (UUJ) in 1998. The Diploma required me to have relevant experience prior to applying, and I strongly believe that taking the two years to undertake further relevant study greatly improved my knowledge and understanding of social work practice and what this may involve.

I found the Diploma to be diverse and interesting, however, the greatest learning for me by far, were the two very different but equally challenging placement learning opportunities (PLOs) that I undertook. My first placement was within Care Management in the Psychiatry of Old Age, and my final PLO was in a Family and Childcare Statutory Team.

Professional development

Upon graduating in 2000 as a qualified social worker, I returned to employment at Thorndale Family Centre on a part time basis. I combined this with another part time post within the Physical Health and Disability Team within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. Statutory social work was a new area for me, and whilst it had its strengths and certainly was great learning for me, I discovered very quickly that social work with children and families in the voluntary sector was definitely my area of preference.

A number of years into qualified practice, I started to undertake my post qualifying (PQ) training. I greatly enjoyed this training and I completed all six parts of the PQ Award (UK). I did this in part by portfolio submission, but then completed The Practice Teacher’s Award. I also used my PQ studies and credits to obtain the BSc in Professional Development in Social Work from UUJ. I am still involved in learning and development and in addition to all the various short courses attended as part of my role, I am currently undertaking *The Strategy and Leadership Award of Professional in Practice* via the Applied Social Studies Masters Course with Queens University on a Part Time / Module basis.

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

Social Work has to be a more than just a 'job'. If you have the right qualities, dedication and compassion, then work in this field can be so rewarding and fulfilling.

You need to have resilience, integrity, compassion. You need to be a 'people person' and have genuine regard for others. You need to be able to problem solve, be prepared to 'see beyond' the immediate presenting issues, and have belief in the potential for change within people.

What challenges do you face in your job?

Working within child protection and parenting assessment, I am constantly challenged about whether I am making the right and correct judgements in respect of families and children. I work with individuals with extremely complex needs. This requires me to ensure that my knowledge base is wide and diverse, and that I have the awareness of the range of services and resources available to assist myself and service users. The ongoing challenge for most services within the social care and social work sector is reducing resources.

In what way is the social work profession rewarding?

Working with other people in difficult, complex or challenging situations is emotionally demanding yet hugely rewarding. I receive great professional satisfaction from realising that my work with and support for an individual or a family, has enabled them to make the decisions, choices or actions necessary to achieve significant change for their family and their well-being. Being part of these transformations in a service user's life is so rewarding and frequently reminds me, why I do this job - despite the stresses and the challenges at times.

How do you see your career progressing?

I have worked within this job for almost 17 years and honestly cannot see myself doing anything other than parenting work and support with children and families. Within my role and service, I have developed the team practice and increasingly we are trained in more accredited models, methods and approaches. Continuous training, learning and development is crucial and centrally important to me.

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

All Social Workers are required to register with NISCC in order to practice as this shows that we are suitably trained, are professional, and that we will remain within a process of ongoing learning and development. The requirement to register also ensures that we are competent to practice and to deliver safe and ethical care.

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

I have always been hugely passionate about social work and my specific role and area of work. Taking on the role of Social Work Ambassador gives me a further opportunity to share my enthusiasm for social work and to hopefully encourage others to choose the social work profession.

