**Helping People Through Social Work: A Personal Journey**

**By: Ilya Shvabskiy**

My name is Ilya Shvabskiy. I was born in Odessa, Ukraine in what was then still one of the republics of the old Soviet Union. When I was ten years old, I immigrated with my family to Brooklyn where I still live today. I am currently attending New York City College of Technology and working on a degree in social work. I live in the Sheepshead Bay neighborhood of Brooklyn with my mother Susanna and our dog, a pitbull-brown lab mix, named Bichok (named after a type of fish found in large quantities off of the Odessa coast of the Black Sea). While most of my time is spent either working or in school, when I do have free time, I usually spend it either exploring a new New York City restaurant with my girlfriend or watching or playing sports. Regrettably, recently it has been far more watching than playing. I am a huge New York Rangers fan and one of my prized material possessions is a framed jersey autographed by several of the players. Despite technically being born in Europe, the only other two cities on that continent I have visited are Moscow and London. If someone told me I could only see one more city in Europe before I died, it would probably have to be, as cliché as it sounds, Paris. If I was given two, the second would have to be Stockholm, if only because I loved *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* book trilogy. Other than that, I would have to say my life is pretty standard.

When I was about twelve years old I had an experience that, while I did not recognize it at the time, put me on the path to going into the human services profession. My grandmother, who had emigrated with us from Odessa and was in her late 60s at the time, had just survived a serious heart attack and had to spend several weeks in a rehabilitation facility under medical supervision. About one week into her stay, some officials from the facility had informed us that my grandmother had gotten out of her bed by herself and had fallen down and suffered a broken arm. My grandmother, however, insisted to us that one of the nurses was careless in helping her to the bathroom and had, effectively, dropped her. But there were no witnesses, all the nurses followed the company line and the facility administration never launched an investigation. Being new immigrants who were still learning and the English language, and who were not very familiar with the legal options available to us, my parents did nothing.

My grandmother recovered and went on to live another seven happy and fairly healthy years, but I have been angry about that experience ever since. It was not so much watching the woman who helped raise me in physical pain that infuriated me, but rather the lack of sympathy and willingness to offer help from the people who could and should have been doing both. Today, I am attracted to human services not only because it seems like a stable and in-demand profession during a tough economy, but also because this childhood experience seared in me a heightened sympathy toward particularly vulnerable people, like my grandmother in that horrid facility, who are in need of help and compassion, but have nowhere to turn to find it.

One skill I possess that would help me succeed as a social worker is that I am a fairly proficient communicator. I am by no means a perfect writer, but I am extremely confident in my ability to accurately document and transmit both the core points and the nuances of my observations and arguments. This is vital in today’s human services industry. According to Baird (2011), the “increasing complexity of human lives and situations requires that clinicians be able to clearly express the meaning of their professional judgments so that others can understand them and implement them appropriately” (p. 110). Citing Alter & Adkins (2001, p. 497), Baird (2011) further notes that the “lives of clients can be ‘significantly diminished by social workers’ inability to write well, or significantly enhanced by strong writing proficiency’” (p. 110). There may be incredibly gifted social workers who can effectively identify a client’s problem and develop a creative and brilliant solution, but whose talents are simply lost because of their inability to successfully communicate those ideas. This is one area of the profession where, especially with continued practice, I would thrive and excel.

The population I would most like to work with is elderly Russian immigrants. Because of my grandmother’s experience mentioned previously, I have sympathy for elderly immigrants of all races and ethnicities. Getting older is difficult enough, but the helplessness and alienation that many elderly immigrants must experience as a result of cultural differences or language barriers present unique psychological and emotional challenges. And everyone deserves to age with dignity. I want to focus on the Russian community simply because my language and knowledge of the culture puts me in a unique position to better understand and be able to respond to the needs of this particular community. Many of these elderly immigrants, especially ones who live in nursing homes or have no family, have nowhere to turn to for help or advice on anything. When, like my grandmother, they are victims of negligence or outright neglect, they not only have zero recourse, but even more tragically, they have no voice. My education and my ability to communicate in both English and Russian will be an invaluable asset to ensuring that this vulnerable population maintains the emotional health, dignity and voice every single person deserves.

In ten years, I envision my career to be more focused on the social and political advocacy aspect of human services. I certainly do want to spend a significant amount of time after graduation working directly with people. There are countless individuals who need help today, now, and not at some point down the road once a certain bill passes or a certain grant is approved. I would be wasting my education and be an affront to my diploma if I were not using it on the front lines working directly with patients. Exactly what form this work will take I do not yet know for certain. Eventually, however, I do want to get into the policy side of human services. I want to make large and sweeping corrections to the system, but for that you need legislative change and, perhaps even more importantly, a proper and efficient allocation of resources. Perhaps this career move will take the form of lobbying or actually running for local office. This is still ten years down the road, however, so only time will tell.

The one aspect of my human services skills I will have to hone, however, is my cross-cultural and diversity skills. According to Baird (2011), learning to understand and respond to cultural differences is the “central key to your development as a person and a professional” (p. 97). I am embarrassed to say that, despite living in the most diverse borough of the most diverse city of the most diverse nation on the planet, I have for too long isolated myself in Brooklyn’s rather insular Russian community. While this has helped me maintain my language and cultural heritage, it remains difficult for me to understand the experiences of people of the various other races and ethnicities of this city. But as a professional, I must advocate for all people, and this is a skill that I will have to consciously develop both on a personal and professional level.

While people around the world are all uniquely shaped by their diverse cultures, at the core of our shared human experience is the emotion of empathy. No matter where we are born and where we live, the vast majority of us care for our fellow human beings. We are sad when we see sadness and when we see pain, we ourselves suffer. We consistently help those in need and many of us frequently do so even to our own detriment. Deep down inside, most of us are social workers already; some of us just decide to turn it into a career. So perhaps, at the heart of it, my desire to become a social worker is selfish. I want to reduce other people’s pain and promote their happiness because, ultimately, it will reduce my own pain and promote my own happiness as well.

References

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