

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 2, Episode 27: Social Work as Social Justice: Working with Unhoused Women

Moderators: Susanna Curry and Arturo Baiocchi

Guest: Genelle Smith

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Susanna Curry (curry@csus.edu) directly should you have questions.

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Susanna Curry: Welcome to "Building Justice," a podcast by Sacramento State Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I'm Susanna Curry, Assistant Professor of Social Work. I am joined by my fellow host for today. Dr. Arturo Baiocchi, Associate Professor of Social Work. How are you, Arturo?

Arturo Baiocchi: I'm doing great, how are you, Susanna?

Susanna Curry: I'm good, I'm looking forward to talking to Genelle today. So, we'll be talking with Genelle Smith. Genelle is a licensed clinical social worker, and she's provided direct social work service for over 25 years in the Sacramento area. In 2017, Genelle became the Executive Director of Wellspring Women's Center, a local nonprofit providing respite and safety net services to vulnerable women and children. Genelle also teaches part time in the Social Work Division at Sac State. Genelle believes in the power of community and love to heal. Her work at Wellspring Women's Center embodies that belief and is deeply centered in humanistic theory. Genelle, thank you so much for being here today.

Genelle Smith: Thank you for having me.

Arturo Baiocchi: So, Genelle, I think I have the first question. I thought we'd start off by hearing a little bit more about the story of Wellspring. What can you tell us about the organization that you are leading right now?

Genelle Smith: Wellspring Women's Center was founded by two women who were social workers and sisters of social service. So one was an LCSW and one was a Bachelors of Social Work, so they, I always say we were founded by women social workers and sisters. Well, there you have it. But this story, the story of Wellspring is really rooted in an encounter that they had with an individual who was unhomed in the early 80s. They took the individual to eat at a fast food restaurant, and in the process of that meeting, they realized that the individual was a woman. They didn't know that quite at first, and then in talking, heard about her challenges of being unhomed and more than anything more than the food they realized what she really wanted and needed was connection. And so they had this dream of sort of, you know, this center for women where they could get connection and support and food. And so, 3 years later one of the founders, Sister Katherine, called the other and said, if we don't do something, we'll never do it, so we better just do it. So they rented a little storefront on Broadway and opened Wellspring women's center with a box of donuts and a Mr. Coffee Maker and no business plan, no business license, no nonprofit, so that all came later. But the women came first, right. They just opened the doors and invited women into the center, and the women came. And they've continued to come, and we've grown over the years, and now we are in a historic firehouse building here in Sacramento. It's over 100 years old. We own this building. It's really special space and we been serving the Oak Park community in Sacramento for over 35 years.

Arturo Baiocchi: Wow! That's a that's an amazing story. I had no idea. You know so many people, when you see folks on the street, there's this discomfort right, and it sounds like the founders not only had a connection with somebody, but then they wanted to do something even beyond that. And it seems like the way you describe it, like the key to it was relationships having a relationship and helping people who were on the streets have a connection. The person that they helped is that the forming connections is that, like a typical situation that Wellspring the staff work with nowadays?

Genelle Smith: That's in our whole philosophy, right. It's hospitality with dignity and love, meaning welcome meaning relationships, meaning connection. The woman that they helped, her name with Jean, and she ended up coming into Wellspring a year after it was opened and she was able to hear a little bit about the story of how she had inspired them, and she continued to come into the center until she passed away, and I think that's one of the key parts of Wellspring is that you know those relationships mean long term. And one of the things I love about that story is that one of our founders would always say, you know Jean wasn't wonderful, and she wasn't perfect, because we're not wonderful perfect people. But we love Jean and Jean loved us so. It was sort of this idea of how love and connection can support, even through the challenges that individuals have.

Arturo Baiocchi: Wow, and there are a lot of "Jean's" in the world, today, and that number of folks living on the street seems to only be growing. What is, what is it that Wellspring does I mean it in the kind of is it a social service agency? Is it an advocacy center, is it a women's shelter? Is it everything of those things? How would you describe Wellspring to kind of a general audience.

Genelle Smith : I would describe Well spring as sort of a day respite drop in for women and children, or anyone who identifies as a woman, Monday through Friday, you can drop in no questions asked, no paperwork to fill out nothing and when you drop in you can receive a very nutritious and healthy meal. You can have additional support safety, net services, case, management, counseling many other things. But the main thing is, you will be welcomed, and you will be able to use the space and what fills right for you, meaning if you just want a meal and you want to take it to go, and you want to leave, you can do that. If you want to sit down by yourself outside in a corner and eat, you can do that. If you want to sit down at a table, you can do that with a bunch of women, and enjoy connection and conversation in multiple different languages that we have here and then there's a place for the children to play. You can get some respite from your caregiving responsibilities, which is huge. So we have a Children's Corner, where the kids have supervised and educational playing. It's just kind of a break. It's respite, but it's also about connection and support.

Arturo Baiocchi: What are kind of..you know..I don't want to characterize people, or ask you to give us caricatures of folks that come into the door. But I imagine that women, in very different phases of their lives, probably use your services and come in. And could you describe some of I mean, you told us a little bit about Jean, but beyond what Jean was facing, what are some other types of stories that that come through the door? What maybe one or 2 commonalities in some of the different stories that you hear?

Genelle Smith : I think the commonalities of the women is that most of them are dealing with very significant poverty. And so, whether that's limited resources or if it's impoverishment, because you don't have a support system, connections, or relationships. But there's just a high level of need based on that condition of poverty and despair. And so that's kind of what characterizes the women as they come through the door, is more that commonality, and then all commonality ends. We have seniors and youth, and we have different ethnicities, different languages, different abilities. So I think there's such diversity, but that common thread of maybe poverty and identifying as a woman.

Susanna Curry : I want to know what energizes you in this work. Could you could talk a little bit about your approach to social work. And what you really feel passionate about this when it comes to this kind of work that you're doing.

Genelle Smith : Social work is, of course, my last passion, as my life calling. I would always say that I was a social worker in the third grade. I would have like support groups for my classmates, you know we'd hang out on the monkey bars and and tell each other all of our problems, and to feel better, we'd hang upside down. And so that was always like my drive was like I was so curious, and wanted to understand other people, and being with people energized me. It made me excited to help and to support and that is still the same when I'm with others I feel excited about the work we're doing. I feel excited about how to create conditions of equality and social justice, how to address the very significant issues of oppression that are happening in our world. And so I think it's through relationships I'm energized. When you're close to the story, your heart just kind of breaks open and you become excited and passionate about change.

Susanna Curry : It sounds to me from what I've heard about Wellspring is that and your philosophy, Genelle, is that you really care a lot about thinking and systems and the long-term view. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that.

Genelle Smith : So social work, of course, is all about systems. And to me, you cannot think if you're not thinking in systems about the very issues that we're facing today, especially when you're looking at issues of the poverty and homelessness. These are systemic issues, and one of the things is, if you're working directly with individuals who are challenged with systemic inequity, you cannot help but want to be passionate about changing those systems. Right? So that's where the social justice drive comes raised for like this. This isn't okay, this isn't right. That this is the design of the system that some folks are left out, that some folks are by design struggling more than others. And so for me, I think that's where you know. I see those systems levels and immediately want to operate on all, like how can I sit with somebody who's in a direct circumstance of suffering knowing that I can have a voice or do more at these other systemic levels, that whether that's local government, which is where I tend to spend more of my time and energy, or even beyond that to State and Federal government.

Arturo Baiocchi: Yeah, I think that's so interesting, because you know, I think the idea that people have of a social worker is you know, working in a sad place, you know, hearing sad stories and just being sad about these things, and I that you know not to be too dismissive of that. I mean that that's the reality that social workers do it work in. But you know, talking to you, you vote this very clear social justice language and framework, and in this way you just said, you know you're also engaged with local politics and I imagine you know, knowing you just a little bit already, that you take what you've experienced, I imagine, working with these women directly to motivate you, if not, inspire you to advocate for some social change at the city and county level. Is that right?

Genelle Smith : Definitely. I think that the when you get proximate to an issue then you feel responsible to the story of that issue, to the humanity of that issue to spread the truth of it, to spread the experience of it, and in in any way that I can do that I try to do that. Whether that's, you know, being involved locally. Certainly, you know City Council is a big one for us here in within the city limits of Sacramento, but also the County Board of Supervisors. Those are the 2 places where you know I'm closely watching policy and trying to support policies that I believe will be supportive of the community that I'm proximate to, right, and increasing understanding overall because I think there's a lot of blame and finger pointing. I don't know just a lot of different pieces to kind of a spiral of negativity that can happen. And so it's like how to how to stay solution focused and create different ways of viewing and seeing the issue, and what we can do about it.

Arturo Baiocchi: And the issue of stigma right? I mean, these are also stigmatizing dynamics, poverty, inequality. And you know we live in a culture where we like to blame people for their predicament, and it sounds like part of what you're doing is also just challenging some of those misconceptions

Genelle Smith : Right. The challenging of the stigma becomes one of the biggest things when it comes to the unhomed population and I'm sure you know this, Arturo, that we're constantly asked questions about that frame it as if the individual themselves is responsible for their circumstances and I think that when we do that we absolve society of the responsibility, which I think is what I'm always trying to go back to. What are we responsible for as a society for the care of the individuals who live within that society?

Arturo Baiocchi: Yeah. And something that you said earlier on, when you're talking about women coming to your organization, something that I find in myself, and I think I find it in everybody else, too, is that discomfort when you see somebody on the street. You almost don't want to see it. You don't want to get too close. You a little bit that discomfort. You're almost afraid of it, right? And when you have a

conversation I think the first Level is like you realize, Oh, this, of course this is a person this is. You can have a relationship with this person, you oh, this is this isn't a monster, this is a human being in a difficult situation. But then, when you talk to enough people, you see commonalities in these stories, and you don't just focus on they're not only decent people, they don't have to be perfect people. But you realize that like oh, these are just people facing the same thing over and over again. And but I feel like what you said like the energizing through contact. I feel the fact that we don't have contacts with folks sometimes makes it easier to stigmatize them and have all sorts of policies and programs about them that really don't benefit them, because it comes from our fear and kind of perceptions of these individuals, right?

Genelle Smith : Definitely. I think it's much easier to have a lot of judgment when you're not proximate, you can stigmatize and create a narrative, maybe in in the mind about the circumstances that led to the unhomed individual struggles. But if you get close, then you start to go. Oh, my goodness. Now there's some threads of policy, and all of this. There's some

Genelle Smith : there's the even if the person themselves made mistakes or struggled in some ways they deserved care and support in ways that they didn't get it, and still are not getting it. Also, I think, with that there's I sincere sort of quality in that discomfort it leads to approaching the circumstances differently, and I I sometimes think that that's really important right like that. Our growth is sort of at the end of our comfort zone, right? And if we stay within that comfort zone of our own thinking, our own safe space, we're not really growing as a society. We're not really challenging the ways that we think and the ways that we're creating systems because they will remain exclusive. So I really feel like that idea of getting uncomfortable, establishing relationship, connecting with things that you or maybe have a little bit of fear.. can be extremely liberating actually.

Arturo Baiocchi:, and I don't want to speak for you, but at least for me, I'm always surprised how I'm always going back and forth in all of this that, like I still get surprised by people. I still get engaged by these issues. I still overcome my own biases, you know, in in being a professor or not like, I am still humbled by what I don't know, or what I thought I knew; but as a practitioner working, you know, for a while in this space. Is that still true for you to do? You find yourself like surprised, sometimes not shocked, but, like you know, working with an individual thinking, you know what the story is, and then it's like a different story.

Genelle Smith: Oh, my goodness! Every day am I. I get surprised, and I run against my own bias and my own implicit, unconscious ways of thinking, and then go. Oh, my gosh! There's another place. I had a total blind spot, not in an ableist way, but in a way that I had to deliberately look to understand how that was a space that I didn't see or know. And I think that's the key piece of doing this work in social work is that you have to just kind of look, and be aware, and allow all of that to show up and continue to be interested. and be ready for all those stories or the differences and the changes and the ways you'll be shocked. And in the you know, we answer so many phone calls and emails of people needing help, right? And they are usually like horrific messages. Hi! I'm a mom with 2 children, and I'm living in my car, can you just please find me shelter? A variation of that over and over and over. So, you begin to approach every conversation, with some sort of thinking that you know something and then you get into the conversation, you realize oh, I don't know anything. This case is this case. It's particular to this individual in this family and the conditions, though, that lead to all of these cases. I do know those I do

know, those conditions, and those are the conditions of not caring or and at the societal level enough about the welfare of people.

Arturo Baiocchi: Yeah.

Susanna Curry: I'm wondering if you could tell us more about why you believe it's important to work at the individual level in addition to working on systems.

Genelle Smith : I think the individual level is where we get proximate right. That word proximate means a lot to me. I feel like the if we're not proximate, we lose perspective and it's not to say that people can't work on policy level, but occasionally coming down and being more proximate to the folks that they're serving and supporting is really important changes the narrative of their own experience in the work they're doing humanizes it. And also I think it's very inspirational right to connect with individuals that you're in some ways trying to support a policy change. So, to me, I think they work with individuals becomes the place of not only the energizing we were talking about earlier, but also the continued kind of tips, kind of tapping in to ensure that you're not pie in the sky'ing it, you're really in touch with the reality of the circumstances that individuals are a in.

Susanna Curry: That's a really helpful way to think about it.

Arturo Baiocchi: As you come in contact with individuals in various forms of I don't know some, some of them going to an acute crisis, others are probably going through more chronic situations that they've been dealing with for several years.: What's your I mean? What's your definition of a successful intervention of of having an impact? Is that different for every person? Or is there something, general, that you try to achieve with everyone that comes through your door? And these are really tough questions, by the way. But I'm very curious about them. So if you have answers to them would make me feel better. Hope I'm not putting you on the spot.

Genelle Smith: I of course. grapple with this success question a lot, especially in a data driven world that's full of outcomes. And you know one, it would. You know how successful is your program and how do you define success? And all of these things we're prevention-based program, which is a little bit more challenging and intervention-based, because you know, and by definition, it's more challenging to measure what you're preventing from happening because it hasn't happened. And so for me, I begin to think about success as the quality of the engagement and so it's like, is the person coming back. you know. Are they? They walk through the doors one time. Why are they coming back? What happened that engaged them that supported them? So what part of success is does the individual begin to feel like they belong? And that includes everybody here, the staff, the volunteers, our donors, our guests. How do they belong as a part of the community? And how are they engaged? How are they valued? And to me that's about the care that you offer in a moment. and that to me is something that's really absent and a lot of the systems that I interact with people answering the phones and really harsh systems that have 20 to 30 pages of paperwork to fill out. To just prove that you need something. You know there's there's something about that that's so unwelcoming.

Arturo Baiocchi: Yeah. yeah, I think our entire welfare apparatus is so unwelcoming and a lot of gatekeeping, and making sure that if people are getting help, that they know that this is that they shouldn't be getting help, and that they have to prove their worthiness multiple times continuously. But I think it's interesting what you're saying about if women come back or not, the way I first heard your

answer. I thought, oh, so if somebody doesn't come back, that might be a success. But then, when I was hearing you answer fully, when they do come back. That's also a success, because they might have found community connection. which is, which is good at any time in your life. So is that fair to say that it's not necessarily something you can measure in terms of whether somebody comes back or not to your service. That's not really a barometer of necessarily a success. Am I hearing that right?

Genelle Smith: Yes, because for most intervention programs that is the definition of success. Oh, they don't need us anymore, like oh, we've you know, we intervened and now they're doing well. Our idea is that no: keep coming back! We really want you to be a part of our community, whether you're doing well or not, because for every human being it's just a matter of time before we're not doing well again.

Susanna Curry: Genelle, I'm guessing you sometimes have the pressure that many nonprofits have, and that is to tell the traditional story of success because of who is funding these programs. I'm wondering if you could speak to that a little bit.

Genelle Smith: Funding is fundamentally based on outcomes. There is so much pressure for every nonprofit in the Sacramento area and in the United States, probably globally to say how great they are, and to measure that in some way that demonstrates some efficacy in their model and their method. And that's not to say that I'm anti data. It's just to say that that's very limiting in terms of how we define success and what success means. I think we are seduced by outcomes in our culture, and in that we lose the idea of process. And for me the process is where the success exists.

Arturo Baiocchi: That's so interesting. I feel like we live in an audit culture where you know it to make an impact to be real. You have to be able to point to something the number of phone calls that you receive the number of referrals that you make, what kind of referrals. And sometimes I hear this mantra of like, if we're doing a really good job we won't need to exist. and I really appreciate that you You're speaking against this this, this narrative, because it's very prominent, and I hear it a lot about if we can just measure it, if we could design performance measures and then go towards success as though the social workers out there just don't really want success, you know. It's like as though we are just happy going along with just existing. But I think I think what gets lost on that it is a process, and that these things don't necessarily go away. Of course we want homelessness to go away, but we don't want people to go away, and we don't want people to hide from their problems, and many times our success measures are just defined as that is, somebody stops going in for services and they stop being a cost burden in a sense right. And then I think it's a we're living in a moment, I think where there's almost like a business model approach coming, you know whether we should have Masters of Social Work and an MBA connected. And while I know that there's some there's many uses for an MBA and I'm, you know. I'm sure many nonprofits would benefit from a more streamlined you know. Look at organizational structures, you know. I'm, I'm sure there's good that MBAs can do. But I one of the things i'm kind of finding myself questioning is like this: this fascination on measuring impact that it's more of a myth or speaks to some more like a political reality than an actual reality, that people are complicated. And if you want to help people who are in a difficult situation, it's not about showing declines of certain numbers and increases in other numbers. So you have to kind of trust that, like we need these institutions or these kind of programs in the community, even if even if they cost money. They should cost money. They should be investments, and the type of impact that you look at them, it's probably not something you see right away. It. It takes years, if not decades, to see the benefits of having something like that.

Genelle Smith: Definitely. And this goes back to my early years and social work as an addiction counselor. and not investing in somebody's sobriety right as that being the only outcome that can exist for somebody, because relapse occurs. And so does that mean that all the work that was done in the sobriety component of that work does it matter now because they've relapsed? And because they've relapsed, what does that mean to continue to invest in them right? Same thing with folks, I mean, I've worked with people who I've you know unhomed who, they've gotten housing, lost housing, gotten Where? Where? What? What's the success? All 3 times we got them housing or the failure of all. 3 times they lost that housing. So I think the success is staying the course and the investment in the individual and the process of their life and their welfare and their well-being. And so those measures to me are one point in time in a person's life.

Arturo Baiocchi: Right, right If you're going to reframe success, what do you think it should be based on?

Genelle Smith: This is me thinking it has to do with how we are investing in the process, right? Not the outcome, the process. If you know our outcome measures are all based on a certain idea of capitalistic well-being, or you know, I don't know what our standard is, of what are we saying s successful outcome is to me, I'm thinking oh, let's just get rid of all that. Let's just invest in the process of being with each other as we navigate our humanity. And what does that mean to be with each other in a way that is supportive and loving and creating places of belonging and support along with the whole continuum of life and addressing the systemic issues that aren't doing that that aren't aligned with that.

Arturo Baiocchi: Yeah, you have my vote, that sounds great to me, because it just acknowledges also that, like there will always be people going through challenges. There always be people who will need help for shelter. There will always be, you know, these things are by-product of capitalism, or whatever else it is also just life. And so we either have a process that's humane and helpful for people, or we try to make those problems go away. And I think we're seeing lots of problems. And we're thinking, how can we make these problems go away as opposed to saying, maybe there's something that's off balance. And how can we get better balance in a way.

Genelle Smith: And how to do we befriend our problems? So there's not going to be any problem-free society. I mean, that's how do we, then befriend that in a way that is in relationship to the people that are experiencing those problems, right?

Arturo Baiocchi: It's we are very eliminating of problems and declaring wars on problems. We're on drugs, you know, and maybe that kind of absolutist framework..doesn't really service that that well in the long term.

Genelle Smith: I think that's proven to be true.

Susanna Curry: and I feel like you know we've talked about. I I hear often this this myth about. you know service providers as the problem, and there's seem like there's a lot of blaming of service providers as well. How do you respond to those that kind of narrative, Genelle?

Genelle Smith: So I have to say, Wellspring Women's Center was founded in the community of Oak Park in 1,987 way before gentrified Oak Park. So it's been here watching these changing neighborhood, and I've been here watching this changing neighborhood. And so it was surprising to me when suddenly

there were neighbors that were like, why are you bringing all these on home folks into our neighborhood? It was like, hey, we've been here all these years, you know, and so I think I recognized that just the way you can stigmatize the individual, you can also stigmatize the organizations and systems that are trying to support and help those individuals, and how that operates is different in every community, in every situation. But I have fielded a ton of really horrific types of challenges when it comes to this changing neighborhood of Oak Park, and it's been eye opening for me to just sort of you that the old adage and social work you all have heard this, that if you're not at the table, you're on the menu right? So I have to be at lots of tables. I've learned to be at all these different tables, so that I can make sure that I'm being an advocate in a voice, and trying to break those stigmas because a lot of times what happens is that if people can say a narrative without you present the narrative regarding service providers is somehow very demonizing.

Susanna Curry : Absolutely. And I think you've talked a lot a lot about your engagement locally in particular, to make sure that your voice is heard, and the voice of alongside those you serve. So I think that's really important to remember. I think that that's a really good note to end on Genelle. Thank you so much for your collegiality, the work you do in the community and thank you for being here today.

Genelle Smith : Thank you for having me. I enjoyed the conversation.

Arturo Baiocchi: Thank you for answering all of our big questions, how to solve everything. And you know I appreciate how much, how thoughtful you are in the work that you do, and appreciate all that you're doing in the community.

Genelle Smith : Thank you so much.

Susanna Curry : And thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. You just listened to the Building Justice Podcast. The information contained in this podcast represents the views and opinions of the hosts and guests, and to not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Sacramento State, or CRISJ. Thank you for listening.