

January 16, 2018

Feature Profile - Field Instructor Michelle Del Carmen

This month our Feature Profile is of Michelle Del Carmen, the President of The Centre for Dreams.

The Centre for Dreams is a Markham day program that provides services for adults living with a developmental disability from across York and Durham Region. The Centre for Dreams provides special individuals with educational programs and social skills training with the hopes of integrating them into the community – both independently and confidently.

Michelle has been a part of The Centre for Dreams family from the very beginning. The need for the program came to light the day her brother John turned 21 and was finished school. Michelle graduated from The University of Windsor with a Bachelor of Social Work in 2000 and has been working in the field of disabilities all her life. As a result of having John as her brother, she has been instrumental in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities from a very young age. She found her niche working at The Centre for Dreams and is very proud to be associated with such an outstanding organization that truly makes a difference in the lives of adults with a developmental disability. Michelle has been supervising students for sixteen years and York students for eleven years. She is also a long-time member of York University's School of Social Work Field Education Committee, sitting on the committee for 8 years.

Interview with Michelle Del Carmen

The Centre for Dreams seems to be rooted in family and love. Tell me about the history of the organization.

The Centre for Dreams exists solely because of my brother John who has a developmental disability. When John was born they were not sure if he would be able to walk or talk and it was recommended for him to be institutionalized, but my parents were not willing to accept that. John started talking when he was 8. My parents supported him to talk and walk, to participate and be part of so many things, this included participating in school, being able to play and be educated. When he turned 21, life changed for John, his world opened or closed depending on how you look at it. After 21, the school system does not provide any care or support anymore, they will try to help families transition to what the family wants, but the options are limited. Some families will move into group homes, participate in day programs or post-secondary programs. The post-secondary programs offered are not always accessible, the students must be at a higher functioning level. The majority of the people using our services are not at this level.

Was The Centre for Dreams born from your mother's response to the school system?

My mother wanted a place where John and his friends could learn, grow and develop, where they continue with the school system, where she could work with them to learn to continue to teach them in terms of academics, life skills and job placements. The reality is most of them cannot sustain being on their own and be as independent as they can. At 21, she was not willing to accept life was over for him. My mom started the program from the ground up. She started it from her house and built it piece by piece. She worked in partnership with Community Living South York. The organization originally started in 1991 with John and two others, by 2003 we became a registered charity. It has been 26 years.



Michelle, with her older brother John

Tell me about why you chose social work and how you became involved in The Centre for Dreams.

I feel I had no choice, I was forced into social work. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely love being a social worker! There were times I wanted to be a graphic designer or wanted to be an accountant during high school, but I always knew I would go into social work. From a very young age, I was an advocate. When I was a toddler, I was always defending my brother, always advocating and fighting for him. I had one set of grandparents who never accepted John for who he was and when it was my birthday I was considered the best grandchild. Our birthdays were one week apart, I always got a fantastic gift, he always got a little tiny gift and I wouldn't accept my gift because John didn't get a real gift.

John is my older brother and we have always been very close. We had a very normal relationship. When we were young we fought like typical siblings and people were so surprised that we would have fights, but I fight with him because he's my brother and I am his little sister. Again, typical sibling relationship I was still protecting him because he's my brother and it was normal for us. People always ask what is it like to have a brother like John and I always respond, I don't know what is it like not to have him? I don't know what it is like to not have developmental disability in my life.

I always did stuff for John, but my parents were adamant that I do my own thing, and that John had his own thing. I always appreciated John's life and he appreciated mine, but we still did our own separate thing and we also did things together. My life was not overshadowed by his developmental disability.

I finished my BSW at the University of Windsor in 2000. I worked at Variety Village for two years and then started working at the Centre for Dreams in 2004. My mom built something wonderful, I was able to contribute by creating advocacy programs and initiatives. I also was able to do the paperwork and administrative pieces. With my social work perspective, I was also able to add a holistic perspective to our programs. Many programs are one or two dimensional, they don't only look at developing life skills or job skills, we try to do it all.

Could you please highlight some of the programs at The Centre for Dreams?

All our programs are focused in an understanding that our members are adults. Families can sometimes be their biggest barrier, they expect us to be just like the school system, or coddle the members, or be like a babysitting service. You're 21 when you come here, which means you are an adult. It is important for everyone to feel like they have dignity, self-worth and self-determination. Sometimes parents do everything for our members and we don't work that way, we want them to become independent.

One of our programs is **Beyond the Label**, an advocacy educational campaign, which redefines labels that are given to our members. Our members are labelled the most horrible things - imbecile, handicap and retarded. This campaign advocates they are beyond the label and they don't need to be changed or fixed, it is the system which needs to change, not them. They are fine just the way there are.

Another one of our programs is the **DreamWorxs** program. Members attend this program to learn skills, including employment and life skills. We support our members to go into the community and work in three different areas – retail, grocery and restaurant. The program includes training from how to stock shelves, to how to communicate with your boss, to cooking and cleaning, health and safety and much more. We have games and a life skills Olympics to make the learning fun.

We also have an **Active Living** program, where our members go bowling every Friday, go to the gymnasium, play floor hockey, soccer, do obstacle courses. They have lots of fun.

You have been supervising students for 16 years. What have been some highlights or memorable moments?

I love learning from the students that come here. I learn from them and they learn from us. They are so fresh and energized, and they have such good ideas. We so often get stuck in a rut and get tired and then students come here and have so many things they want to do. It's really inspiring. We have a variety of students who do their placements here – social work students, nursing students, recreation and leisure students, high school students from York and Seneca. We have professional development training for all our students. We also encourage students to work together, since they are from different disciplines they learn a lot from each other.

I remember when I first started supervising York students they kept saying AOP to me. I remember feeling like such an idiot because I didn't know what AOP was. When I asked one student what it was, she was astonished. She told me it is anti-oppressive practice in a tone like how could you be so stupid? She explained what the framework was. I practiced AOP, but I just didn't know what it was called. The student teased me the rest of the time she was here. I still laugh about this today. When I was studying we learned this theory, but it wasn't given the name anti-oppression yet.

There is so much for us to learn from students. I have many years of experience that I can offer them through my stories, but it is such a great reciprocal relationship. I want to continue to learn, I always ask the students what textbooks they are reading in school and then I buy them. I feel that it is so important to keep current and always enhance my learning.



Field Education Student Training - Professional Dev

The Centre for Dreams Professional Development Chart for all their Field Education Students

Sometimes the organizations social workers are employed at can be bureaucratic and top down. As an Executive Director and President how do you manage and negotiate this for yourself and the students you supervise?

Although The Centre for Dreams has an organizational chart that portrays our bureaucratic system, this is an ideology that I try and avoid. Since we are a grassroots organization I like to create a more democratic system amongst staff members. I like to have the input, and opinions of each and every member of our

team so that our organization moves in a positive and progressive direction. I promote this democracy by hosting a mandatory staff meeting every other week with my team so that we have the opportunity to discuss changes and current events taking place on all fronts of the organization. I promote this same attitude with my placement students as I have consistently made the effort to meet with each one of my students on a weekly basis to discuss these same changes and current events where everyone feels welcomed and valued. I also encourage each of my staff members to do the same with the students they supervise. In essence, our organizational chart is more of a formality that it is a clear idea of how we operate. As the Executive Director and the President of The Centre for Dreams, I strongly enforce a democratic system with my colleagues and placement students alike.

For the students I always let them know the beauty of coming to a place like this because there is not a lot of red tape. The world is your oyster here at The Centre for Dreams and if you have an idea, voice your opinion. We encourage students if they are interested in starting an initiative or running a program to talk to us to see if it is possible. We want our students to try new things and we can be their safety net, we are here to catch them, if they make a mistake it is okay. We really encourage everybody at all levels to think outside the box.

How do you support students to bridge theory and practice?

Sometime students don't understand where anti-oppression practice fits here. They don't understand what theories we practice here, they only see strength based theory. One assignment we do with all our social work students is they get an assignment where they look at 5 different theories, talk about the theory and how it is being utilized in the centre and give an example of how they use the theory. I was the type of student where I needed to read a theory and then I needed to read the theory again, and then I needed to read it a third time, and then I needed a sample. Some students can read a theory and get it right away and some don't. I always let my students know it is okay if you don't get it the first time. Now I am the one who is able to give them different examples. I always ask them what is your understanding of the theory? York students usually have a good understanding of the theory. We look for concrete practice examples of how different theories are practiced here.

What tips do you provide students you supervise about practicing self-care?

I advise each and every one of my students to practice self-care. I provide tips and words of encouragement by expressing to my students how I myself practice

self-care. I strongly believe in leading by example therefore; if my students know my strategies for self-care then they will be able to realize the importance behind it. I also take the time to speak to my students about how if we as practitioners take of ourselves then we will be able to better serve our clients.

Your social work career has been very rich and full so far. Do you have any other social work career goals you want to fulfill?

Currently, I am teaching at Centennial College in the Recreation and Leisure program and I want to continue teaching. When I first got that call from Centennial College to teach, I ran down the hall here screaming. I was so excited because that was one of my professional goals for the longest time. I love it and I get nervous every time I go in front of the class and teach. I get butterflies every time I stand-up in front of the class because I take it very seriously. I love it and would like to teach in a social work or a critical disability program one day. I would also love to be on a board of directors. Another goal for me would be to get involved in the Ministry of Community and Social Services, to do some type of disability training. One of our goals here is to expand our current disability training. We already work with the York Regional Police, York Regional Transit, and the school system. We have been doing a lot of training about using the proper language, talking about what are developmental disabilities and communication strategies. I want to expand that work with the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

What advice would you give to new social worker graduates?

Keep at it. Don't be discouraged. It is tough field but keep at it. I am still in touch with many of my former students. I always say never burn your bridges because you will cross paths again and it does not matter how many years later, you will inevitably cross paths with someone you know from the field.

Network, network, network – networking is key. Keep in touch with other social workers and former supervisors and drop somebody a line because you never know who is hiring and what opportunities they may have.

I always tell students to leave their mark while they are in placement. Do something that will make their supervisor and agency remember them. You want them to remember you in five years when you need them for that crucial reference call.