

## **Feature Profile - CUPE Faculty and Former Alum William Woolrich**

William Woolrich has several years of experience working in direct practice as a social worker on a forensic mental health team and then managing a supportive housing program. He also has over a decade of experience teaching social work, much of it online, and has several conference presentations exploring innovative teaching methods in post-secondary education. He has a MSW from York University's School of Social Work and is now a Doctoral Candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University where he is focusing on teaching and learning in higher education and, in particular, examining critical approaches to pedagogy for students considering a career in social service administration. Most recently, he has accepted a full-time faculty position at George Brown College where he teaches in the Community Worker Program.

**In this interview, William discusses his passion for teaching, his social work field experience and the CUPE 3903 strike.**

### **Why did you decide to study social work?**

I did a Bachelor of Science in Psychology at the University of Toronto. After I graduated, I was unsure of next steps. The person I was dating at the time was enrolled in the BSW program at York University and told me about it. I thought it sounded up my alley because of the critical social work perspective. I was interested in working with historically marginalized populations, in particular being a bi-racial person myself, I was interested in the challenges faced by people of colour.

I got in to the part-time BSW Post-Degree program, back when it was part of Atkinson. Since it was part-time, I was able to work at the same time. I did research with an organization that is now called Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. I was researching the psycho-social impact of assisted devices. It was kind of related to the field.

### **What interested you about York University's Graduate Social Work Program?**

You know how it is, when you're young you idolize graduate studies, even though I didn't have a career goal in mind. All I knew is I wanted to apply for a Master of Social Work. I was super pumped to get into both York and Carleton, but cost was a

factor. York made sense financially, so I could stay in Toronto. I really wanted that critical perspective as well, and York was able to offer me that, as well as funding. There were a lot of reasons that York worked for me, so I stayed at York and finished my MSW.

## **Where were you first employed once you completed your MSW?**

My first job after the completion of my MSW was on an ACT (Assertive Community Treatment) Team. I worked there for three years.

To be honest, the work made me uncomfortable. I felt disconnected from my critical values. I felt I was following a medical model and majority of my position was to deliver medication. There was a lot of self-reflection. Is this what I want to do? The answer was no. This is not why I studied social work.

My next position was a managerial position at Regeneration Community Services, an organization which provides supportive housing for consumer survivors. I have a long history with them. It started when I was doing my MSW, my practicum was at Regeneration Community Services. When I finished my placement, they asked me if I wanted to be a board member. I have a family member who is a consumer survivor – my mom is a person who has been in and out of the psychiatric world for a long time. Due to my practicum and having a family member who is a survivor, they invited me right after I completed my practicum to be on the board.

During those three years when I was working on an ACT team, I was also on the board of directors. When a program manager position became vacant and they encouraged me to apply. This all happened because of my MSW practicum. It got me on the board of directors and then I became a staff member. It was fantastic, and they are wonderful people and supportive. In fact, I am back on the board again.

As a staff, I was there for 3 years. I managed congregate living supportive housing for consumer survivors. I also managed IT oddly enough.

## **You are currently a Doctoral Candidate with the Faculty of Education. Tell me about your dissertation.**

I didn't feel I was well prepared as I would have liked to be when I became a manager. I didn't feel well-prepared for an administrative position. I felt lost. The critical perspective focused on being an advocate in social work. How do we successfully advocate for better policies? How do we advocate for our clients? So, when I became a manager I felt that I didn't know what I was doing. If you spend all your time fighting the system, what if you are a manager and you become a part of system? I didn't know how to negotiate that, my participation in the neo-liberal model. I struggled. This doesn't jive with anything I have learned. I felt like a sell out, that I lost my values. For my dissertation, I am looking at pedagogies to prepare social workers and social service workers to practice critically in administration.

## **What are some of your employment highlights in social work?**

Discovering the things I didn't want to do was very valuable to me. It helped me figure out the things I was excited about, like teaching. All my failures and challenges have been valuable to me.

I naturally gravitated to teaching. I could prepare teaching activities with excitement. I could engage with the students and look forward to it. Even the stuff you don't love to do, like grading, even those things did not feel like a burden. The fun things about teaching, outweighed the mundane things.

I have enjoyed all the courses I have taught. It was really fun and exciting to design my own courses, including the *Foundations of Social Work Research* and *Current Issues in Mental Health*. I was excited to develop partnerships with experimental education office. I was the first social work professor to offer in a course, other than a practicum, a full fledged experiential education component to the research methods course. I brought in community partners who had research questions and problems, which the students worked on over the course of the term. It was exciting working with the community. When the students did these projects, the community partners appreciated it. This was stuff they were going to use and the students knew that. Also, it was skilled based and a great way of obtaining skills. I learn by doing and for many of the students they learn the same way. Sometimes after a course ends we don't remember what we learned because we didn't use those skills on a practical level.

I always try to be innovative in my teaching. We must be mindful and learn from our student body. We must remember York has one of the highest percentage of students who are the first in their family to go to university, so for many of these students they

didn't grow up knowing what a university education looks like and what it means to be a university student. I was a high school dropout. I dropped out and worked in retail and then went to university as a mature student. I know what it is like to come into university and feel overwhelmed, not understand the culture or how things work. I didn't have that preparation. I didn't know what it meant to take an exam. I didn't know how to properly cite sources. I didn't know how to edit a paper. Many of these students are in that same boat as I was.

## **How did your teaching career begin?**

About a year after I graduated from the MSW program, I was offered by the School of Social Work at York to teach an online course in mental health. I think it was partially based on the fact that I did my practice-based research paper on ethical work with consumer survivors. I had the academic knowledge, but I also had the IT skills. At that time, we were exploring online courses because there was a huge push for online education.

## **Do you have any favourite teaching moments?**

I think teaching a critical perspective is exciting because I cannot believe how new it is to students. For example, they have never heard about the survivor movement or anti-psychiatry. They view mental illness through the dominant medical model. To be able to provide an alternative perspective is very exciting.

## **What has been some of the best advice you have provided to students about bridging practice and theory?**

To be honest, I don't give very much advice, because I don't have very many answers, mostly what I have are questions. If I do give advice, it is to never think about theory without practice. When we talk about theory, we always need to make time to ask the question, what does this look like in practice?

## **What have you learned from the students you taught? How have they inspired you?**

I think many of the students with lived experiences have inspired me. Many of them have challenged me and that is inspiring as well. Don't get me wrong, it has not always been easy. There have been times when students challenge me in difficult

ways, sometimes they force me to rethink things. I can get defensive just like anyone else, but I think one of my strengths is that I do not insist on things. I keep considering and questioning myself and I think that can be a strength.

By students sharing their lived experience, it has allowed me to understand where they are coming from. It's important for students to feel comfortable in the classroom. To feel that they belong. Students get so nervous about their first big assignment. I do this exercise, the week before the assignment is due, everyone should bring a draft of their assignment and you get 5 percent for bringing a draft. I ask for a brave volunteer to show me their draft and I put it on the document camera and I grade the paper in front of the entire class. I show the class - this works in the paper and this does not. We all talk about the paper and then I grade it live. They learn so much in the process about their own paper because I am sure they see themselves in it.

I learned to edit my own papers as an undergrad by going to the writing centre repeatedly. I would have a draft and I would take it to the writing lab. Students just don't have the time to do that anymore. It is a different time. Every student works. When I was in university, it was standard for students to be full-time student and that's it. I remember I got money from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). It was a decent amount of OSAP, and most of the students I knew lived off of it. It would be a frugal existence, but we could manage. You didn't have to work. Rent was not as expensive, food was not as expensive. It was a different time. Now, almost every student is working. As a professor I must work with how students are living currently. I need to adjust to where the students are at.

## **You were recently on the picket lines as part of CUPE 3903 strike, the longest strike in the post-secondary sector in Canadian history. As a York alum, and a current CUPE 3903, how did the strike impact you?**

I have experienced many different strikes at York, including a YUFA strike and numerous CUPE 3903 strikes.

With this last strike, truthfully, it was an awkward position to be in as a Social Work Unit II on strike. There are not a ton of social work faculty from Unit II on the picket line and for good reason. Social Work Unit II members, unlike let us say History or English Unit II, have full-time jobs and teach on the side. Unlike other disciplines,

teaching is not their primary source of income. I was unusual because teaching was all I was doing. Most of social work folks on the picket line were from Unit I. The strike was both emotionally and financially exhausting for all three units, but for Unit I especially. The CUPE 3903 Unit I social workers did what social workers should do - they acted on principle. But being on the picket line is hard and exhausting. You experience the brunt of people's aggression everyday when you are picketing. It is also boring and physically exhausting. Occasionally I had a couple of my students come out and that made me feel good.

## **Were you disheartened with the process? How it all ended?**

I think it was unfortunate, but I still believe in labour movements and employees having the right to go on strike. **I still believe in taking risks and asking for what you want and deserve. Change is always possible.**