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Social Worker

Sample

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# Starting Social Work

Reflections of a Newly Qualified  
Social Worker



Rebecca Joy Novell

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# Dedication

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## Reid Finlay

The first few months of my Masters course in social work were somewhat overshadowed by how much I was struggling financially. I was several thousand pounds in debt, couldn't afford to pay rent and could only afford one meal a day. I was working every evening and weekend to try and earn enough to continue my course but I soon realised that I would not be able to sustain my lifestyle for two years. Anyone who has struggled with money will know the pervasive impact it has on your life. It is a source of constant worry, stress and sadness. I was very low for many weeks. Knowing how much I wanted to do social work, and knowing that I couldn't afford to, was heartbreaking.

One evening in late October, I remember clearly, I was sitting at a bus stop in the outer suburbs of Sheffield after another evening shift as a social carer. It was dark and cold and pouring down with rain. My bus was typically late. After 40 minutes of waiting I burst into tears. I remember literally sobbing in the street. Luckily there was no one around to see me as the pathetic mess I was. As I started to pull myself together, my Mum rang me. To this day I still believe that phone call was a miracle.

Mum knew I had been struggling with money and had rung to tell me that her Uncle Reid, who had met me twice as a young child, was willing to pay off all my debts, pay my rent for two years and provide me with a weekly income. Reid was willing to do all that because he knew from my Mum just how much I wanted to be a social worker. Unsurprisingly, I reverted to uncontrollable sobbing.

Because of Reid, I was able to continue the course; and without the constant worry of lack of money. Reid gave me the two greatest academic years of my life. I spent every day learning how to help people to the best of my ability. He enabled me to spend my time concentrating on the thing I love most in the world.

I completed the course in July 2012 and graduated in January 2013. I was waiting until my Graduation Day to tell Reid exactly how much he had done for me; to tell him that completing this Masters and qualifying as a social worker is my proudest achievement to date; to tell him thank you.

I found out in October 2012, almost two years exactly since the miracle, that Reid passed away in the night. It was sudden but it was peaceful.

I am filled with incredible guilt and sadness that I did not tell Reid what he meant to me sooner. Reid barely knew me but was willing to give his money to see me fulfil my dream. My admiration for him is indescribable.

My Mum has told me that before he died, Reid put aside enough money for me to start a PhD. Something I desperately want to do but never in my wildest dreams thought I could afford.

I want you to know Reid, that because of you I spend every day trying to help some of the most vulnerable children in our society. With social work I have found my purpose in life. The work I do and the people I work with complete me.

I am devastated that the world no longer has you in it. My memories of you are as a kind and gentle man and I promise to work tirelessly to ensure that your generosity continues through me.

All I can really say (and what I should have said a long time ago) is *Thank you*.

Rest in peace, Reid.

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# Meet the author

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## Rebecca Joy Novell

Rebecca Joy Novell is a Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) working for a charity in Sheffield which works with homeless young people. She graduated from The University of Sheffield in 2012 with a Masters in social work. Rebecca has been involved with youth justice for five years in a variety of voluntary and paid roles, and is currently undertaking a PhD in Criminal Justice. She was recently elected to the Professional Assembly for The College of Social Work and regularly blogs for *The Guardian's* Social Care Network.



# Acknowledgements

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The process of writing this book has made me realise just how lucky I am; I owe a lot of thanks to a lot of people. I would like to thank my parents, Emma Mulliner and everyone who took the time to proofread my ramblings. Thanks to Di for taking a chance on me. But I would also like to thank all those people who have carried me through the lowest moments in my life and have led me to this happy moment; Mum, Dad, Nanna, Reid, Miss Allen, the nine LGGS girls, G2, G1, Louise and Mr Leitch.

Thanks to my Godfather Brian who taught me to see the good in everyone. To Andy for being the best 'cornerman' I could ever ask for. To the women who continue to challenge and inspire me as a social worker: Nora and Nell. And to my partner, Rob, who has spent numerous evenings dealing with all my worries. While I've not known you for very long, you've helped me through a life-time of problems. Wherever we find ourselves in ten years, know that you saved me.

To Lizzy for sitting by me in the hospital when we thought I would never see my Mum again. There are no words for what that meant to me. And finally, to God, whilst I'm still not sure what or where you are, you helped my Mum beat cancer this year and without you there would certainly be no book. Thank you.

Sample

# 1

## Introduction

*Do you want a hot pot?* asked Betty.

*Ooh, that'd be lovely, Betty. Thank you,* replied Deirdre. *I wonder if Peter will want some.*

*Ooh, I wonder?* responded Betty.

How Coronation Street is prime-time television, I will never know. It was another evening spent staring at the screen with my Nanna, watching the drudgery that is life in the Rovers Return, when my Nanna asked me: *What do you want to do when you're older?*

In a desperate attempt to cling on to the little life that I could feel ebbing away to the dulcet tones of Deirdre Barlow, I responded with enthusiasm:

*Well, Nanna. I just want to help people. Fight for good, you know? Make this world a fairer and happier place. There is so much injustice in this world and I want to make a difference. I believe that all men and women are born equal and should be treated as such. I believe in equality of opportunity. I believe that under no circumstances should money take precedence over human rights. We should value others not because we can gain from them, but because they too are human. Our value comes not in doing, achieving or creating, but simply in being. As Ruskin states, 'There is no wealth but life', and I want to help people lead the best life they possibly can.*

Without a hint of sarcasm my Nanna replied, *And how much does that pay?*

I suppose that'll teach me to be less pretentious.

## THE CURRENT STATE OF SOCIAL WORK

There is a dark cloud hanging over social work at the moment. I worry for those who have just started their journey into the field, or those who are considering it as a career, because much of the conversation around this profession is very off-putting. If you relied solely on mainstream media for information you would believe that social workers spend most of their time failing to protect children at risk while simultaneously putting happy and healthy children into care. Mind you, if you relied on mainstream media for all your information, I suspect negligent social workers may be the least of your problems, what with the imminent threat of world annihilation from swine flu, SARS and terrorism. The social work I see on the front pages is not the social work I know.

Social work is about so much more than Child Protection. Social workers specialise in mental health, disabilities, older people's care, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, fostering, adoption, homelessness, gangs and youth offending, to name but a few areas. We are a wide and varied bunch. And contrary to popular belief, social work *is* a good thing. Some people may find that statement uncomfortable, or even debatable but, at its core, social work is about making things better for people. And I believe that is a good thing. Of course, the process of helping people can become convoluted, warped and occasionally broken, but it is our job to ensure that doesn't happen.

We live in a time where being optimistic about change is made almost impossible. The economic situation is having a dramatic effect not only on the public sector but on the majority of British people. Increasing levels of poverty are creating more and more social problems. Again, if you relied on mainstream media, you'd be sure that it was people on benefits who caused the recession. We are living in desperate times. And while the Government points the finger of blame at everyone who has ever used the Welfare State, social workers are left to fix the ever-increasing number of problems. But of course social problems have been re-branded as individual problems, and social work is being forced to focus more on working with individuals than on looking at communities and the wider picture, thus making the task of creating social change an even harder one. We are literally expected to solve problems such as homelessness and youth crime one person at a time.

Have I sold social work to you yet?

Social work is complex and the more I know, the more I realise the depths of those complexities. I knew when I chose to be a social worker that there were things that would need improving. I liked the idea of being part of those changes. And while there has been, of late, a dark cloud hanging over us, I can see the sun beginning to break through. I believe it is a very exciting time to be a social worker as the discourse is always around change and improvement. There is a clear sense of always needing to better ourselves and put our arrogance aside in the name of good practice. There is definitely an air of hope around.

## **THE AIM OF THIS BOOK**

This book has a very simple aim. I want to show you my journey into the profession and what social work has been like for me. I'm not trying to sell the profession to anyone. In fact, I think it takes a unique sort of person to want to do (and be good at) social work. Nor am I trying to put anyone off the profession. This book is simply my honest reflections of my experience (although the names and ages of people I work with have been changed for confidentiality reasons). So, if you are thinking about becoming a social worker; if you have just started the course; if you are newly qualified; or even if you have been in the profession for 20 years and are losing your passion for it, I hope that this book will help you have a clearer picture (or a reminder) of what social work is really like for those just starting out, and why some people still choose to do it.

What this book won't be is a guide to the best theory or practice examples. There are hundreds of people out there who can do that a lot better than me. Nor will it show you how I have integrated the Professional Capabilities Framework into my practice. If you are a student social worker you can figure it out for yourself, and if you're not a social worker at all, you won't thank me for introducing you to our assessment system. I wanted to strip away the jargon and focus on the emotional and human impact of the profession. I have included excerpts from my online blog, which was written at the time I was studying, to give you a sense of how I was really feeling at the time. On reviewing my blog, I realised that I relate most of my life experiences to some aspect of *The Lord of The Rings*. I'm not sure what that says about me but I have tried to keep my Frodo and Gollum references to a minimum in this book. Also, a few lovely and inspiring social workers I have met along the way have added their contributions about how the journey has been for them.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This most sensible way to structure this book was chronologically. It begins with me choosing which course to take, progresses through two years of university, and ends with me qualifying. As a result, the reader will get a clear sense of what a roller-coaster of a journey I have been on and the rainbow of emotions I have experienced. I apologise in advance to you, the reader, if I give you a false sense of security that everything is positive, and then on the next page drag you into a pit of despair. I originally thought about warning you in advance if a depressing bit was coming up; but then I thought, sod it, life doesn't work like that. You don't get warned about the crisis phone calls you receive telling you one of your service users has been arrested, so if I have to go on the roller-coaster, you do too.

I'm sure you will have heard social work being described as a 'thankless task'; a description which could not be further from the truth. Yes, it is exhausting and repetitive and frustrating, and sometimes you feel like you are making no progress. But, once you sit back and reflect on what would happen if you were not there to offer the support you did, you begin to realise just how fantastic this job is. Even allowing someone to off-load their anger or hurt for an hour is a great reward, knowing that they felt able to tell you about their problems. Simply having people know that you're there if they need you to be is a great feeling and an honour. And, very occasionally, you may end up saving someone's life.

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