



A fireside chat ignites a passion for regulation

Passion rebuilds the world for the youth. It makes all things alive and significant.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

If a group of social work regulators got together to talk about their profession and how serving as regulators has flamed the passion innate in their desire to be social workers, it would probably look like the opening session of ASWB's Spring Education Meeting, held in St. Louis in May. Four social workers representing differing lengths of service and different disciplines within the social work profession sat down for a "fireside chat" to explore the topic "The Passion of the Profession Meets the Paradigm

Idaho (13 years) and Sandra Barlow of Florida (30 years).

The panel was moderated by Program and Education Committee member Anna Lyn Whitt of Mississippi, who has worked for 15 years as a social worker and since 2008 as a regulator. During the discussion that followed, Whitt's questions gave panelists a platform for sharing what they were most passionate about both in their professional roles as social workers and in their roles as regulators. At the same time, Whitt underscored the inherent frustration social workers who become regulators experience when faced with the "rigid, legalistic" parameters that statutes and rules—the "paradigm" of regulation—force them to work within. Nevertheless, everyone on the panel valued their experience as regulators, because it allowed them to reconnect with their profession and ultimately, they all agreed, be better social workers.

Sandra Barlow, an independent clinical social worker who works primarily with children and chair of the Florida regulatory board, has come to understand that the work social workers do is more than one lifespan; it's intergenerational. "If we can effect a positive difference for one family or one person, then



Sandra Barlow of Florida, M. Jenise Comer of Missouri, moderator Anna Lyn Whitt of Mississippi, Lynnet Kase of Idaho, and Merri-Lee Hanson of New Brunswick discussed their passion for social work and social work regulation at the opening session of the Spring Education Meeting.

of Regulation." The panel's years of experience ranged from 10 for Merri-Lee Hanson of New Brunswick to 40 years for M. Jenise Comer of Missouri. Other panelists were Lynnet Kase of

that positive difference carries into the future indefinitely,” she said. “I want to be sure that I do it in an ethical, moral, and good way, a helpful way.” Her work as a social work supervisor has been strengthened by her service as a regulator. “Regulation has clarified how to define and do this work in the way it needs to be done to protect the public and the way that provides good services,” she said. Barlow’s best piece of advice: “We are social workers and regulators at the same time, and I think my advice would be to be mindful ... and thoughtful about the passion and the protection and the profession.”

M. Jenise Comer, ASWB secretary and chair of the Missouri board, works at the University of Central Missouri, where she says she “trains baby social workers.” Comer found her passion in studying human behavior, or as her years of self-awareness finally allowed her to admit, “I was just nosy.” What Comer says drives her as a social work educator is helping students grow professionally, “into someone who understands how to implement the knowledge, values, and skills in their work with others.” The most challenging aspect of serving as a regulator is “separating the personal, from the professional, from the regulator,” she said. “You are there to apply the ethics and the law and make tough decisions. I am excited when we can at least stop somebody from doing harm.” Regulation has served two purposes in her professional life: It fueled her desire for

lifelong learning and it made her a disciple, dedicated to helping her students become prudent and ethical practitioners. Her advice: “Continue to learn. Every situation is different. There are boundary violations and boundary bendings. Those are those ‘shades of gray’ that are difficult to manage. We just have to continue to do the best that we possibly can.”

As a Canadian regulator from New Brunswick, **Merri-Lee Hanson** has a dual responsibility to promote and regulate the profession. She currently works for the Ministry of Health as a wait-time coordinator. Before that she worked in community mental health in a small town, where she discovered her passion was finding ways to “normalize the human experience,” to reduce the stigma associated with diagnoses of depression and anxiety in a small community. Within her job in government, she said, regulation can be challenging. “It’s tricky when you’re trying to regulate the profession and also promote it.” At the same time, Hanson said, “when you’re so actively involved in pushing forward an item like a scope of practice document and encouraging people to recognize that social work has a broad stroke in what people can do; to me that’s been really exciting to be involved with and has certainly encouraged me as a social worker personally.” Her advice for other regulators: “Remember to be a champion for the profession. Remember that by regulating the profession, we are promoting the profession.”

Like Hanson, **Lynnet Kase**, who works at the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections and has served for four years on her board, also believes that regulation has a role in protecting the social work profession in addition to providing public protection. “Regulation helps social workers to be better and stronger, and it increases the reputation of the profession,” she said. Nevertheless, one of the challenges Kase experiences as a regulator is recognizing that the decisions she makes affect her colleagues. But regulation also helps reinvigorate her. “I pay more attention to decisions I make and decisions being made around me,” Kase said. “It reminds me on a daily basis what my role is.” Her passion in her work with adolescents who have gotten in trouble with the law is found in “helping them to establish good value systems so they can grow into happy and healthy adults.” Her advice: “Maintain a passion for the profession. Stay true to the rules, laws, and ethics of the profession. Stay true to the passion of what social work is about.”

This opening session of ASWB’s Spring Education Meeting helped participants connect with each other through shared experiences. The session laid important groundwork in identifying the themes that would repeat throughout the rest of the sessions: the role of regulation as a source of public protection and as a means of strengthening the profession.