



FIELD EDUCATOR
SIMMONS SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Volume 6.1 | Spring 2016 | Kudos | © May 2016 | fieldeducator.simmons.edu

2015 Heart of Social Work Award Winner: Carol Heinisch

Author(s)

*Kathryn Ross, MSW
University of Denver*

Carol Heinisch was named winner of the 2015 Heart of Social Work Award at the Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting in Denver, CO on October 17, 2015. The award is presented annually by the North American Network of Field Educators and Directors in recognition of an agency-based field instructor that has made exemplary contributions to field education and the social work profession. What follows is taken from the nomination submitted by Kathryn Ross, Associate Professor of Practice at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, in support of Carol Heinisch as an excellent candidate for the award. – Editor’s Note

As the first social worker hired at a public defender’s office in the state of Colorado, Carol Heinisch is a pioneer. Her vibrant and dedicated contribution to her office has not only affected local policy change, but also created a ripple effect throughout the state’s legal culture. For the last 8 years, Carol has been a field instructor for MSW candidates attending the Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) at the University of Denver (DU). She has guided, mentored, and trained 22 social work interns. Throughout her commitment to training social work students she has blazed a trail for social work within the Colorado correctional system.



Over the years, Carol’s students have repeatedly nominated her for DU’s “Field Instructor of the Year” award. Students repeatedly reflect on Carol’s remarkable skill, creativity, and innovation in field instruction. One colleague remarked, “Carol is able to establish a real relationship with each student,” and thus her students are witness to her process of “approaching every individual with unconditional positive regard.” Her colleague further added Carol excels in understanding each student’s strengths, areas in need of growth, interests, and in turn skillfully helps foster projects that grow each student’s ability to lead. For example, she helped a student with an interest in vicarious

trauma to write a report that would serve as the foundation of a presentation to members of the public defender's office. She facilitated another student's interest in restorative justice as a possible tool for public defenders. Furthermore, Carol fosters relationships between the social work students and the attorneys by connecting attorneys with specialized knowledge to students' areas of interest. One former student remarked that Carol has worked hard to make her students feel comfortable and confident working with both attorneys and clients in the demanding criminal justice system. She allows personal autonomy to her students, and expects dedicated learning and independence in order to get the necessary experience to work with offenders.

Exercising social work values and ethics in a professional legal setting can be challenging. However, Carol assigns her students the important task of educating attorneys regarding social work ethics, thereby facilitating their own professional growth. Even though certain ethics and values of the attorneys may conflict with social work, Carol works hard to educate the attorneys and office staff on the needs and empowerment of clients. Attorneys are trained to focus on the legal needs of their clients, however, Carol redirects the attorneys' focus to include an understanding of their clients' greater social and emotional needs and the best ways to address them within the criminal justice system.

As the only social worker within the state office, managing mostly high profile cases and clients, Carol still manages to treat everyone with the same dignity and respect while applying social work's values and ethics. A former student noted that the difficult environment within the public defender's office often makes it difficult for attorneys to express the vicarious trauma that they may experience working with difficult criminal cases and disempowered and disenfranchised clients. Carol offers emotional support to attorneys by providing a safe place to express their thoughts and feelings. On a near daily basis, attorneys visit Carol to process their own difficult on-the-job experiences. She provides support to attorneys in a demanding and emotionally taxing professional setting.

Carol has created an environment of flexibility, personal growth and gentle guidance within the public defense system. Carol is genuinely concerned for her students' successes and overall wellbeing. One student shared that she had returned to school after 24 years and had many insecurities. Carol personalized a note and posted it to the student's work computer stating, "YOU CAN DO IT!" Furthermore, Carol praises her students for a job well done while having a knack, without appearing too authoritative, for discussing areas that may need improving.

Carol Heinisch has tirelessly served the university community as a member of DU's Field Advisory Board for four years. Made up of representatives from the Denver metro area agencies, with whom the school of social work partners, the board steadily steers the field department and outlines academic curriculum. Carol's tenure and tenacity continuously provided the board with valuable insights into the "real world" of social work. Many of her efforts created a comprehensive and elaborate field evaluation process, thus helping the Graduate School of Social Work at the University

of Denver achieve a high caliber of special field placements within valuable agencies. Carol offered solutions and generated a vast amount of knowledge. However, Carol's teaching practices can also be infused with a great amount of humor. During GSSW's Specialized Field Instructor training series Carol taught a class on "self-care." Rather than talking about mindfulness, meditation, and exercise, Carol chose to talk about humor and its value in our lives and in the work place. She gave out red rubber noses as a take-away gift and challenged the room to, at some point the next day, put on the rubber nose in order to remind colleagues of the value of enjoying life in the moment.

Carol's contributions towards facilitating the education of students at DU's Graduate School of Social Work are innumerable. Her colleagues consider her a "teacher's teacher." One student said, "Ms. Heinisch's dedication to her profession and clients is evident to both her students and the attorneys with whom she works. She has empowered us to learn and grow as both professionals and individuals. She provides daily support for us both as student learners and as people. We hope all students in the future have the opportunity to work with someone as professional and compassionate as Carol Heinisch." It is with full appreciation of the example she sets for faculty, students, and the community that we congratulate Carol for winning the 2015 Heart of Social Work Award.