



FIELD EDUCATOR
SIMMONS SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Volume 9.2 | Fall 2019 | Kudos | © October 2019 | fieldeducator.simmons.edu

Riva Zeff: On Directing Field, Mentoring, and Lessons Learned

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[Editor's Note: Riva Zeff, MSW is retiring after 50 years in foster care, adoptions, and social work field education. To celebrate her contributions during 11 years (3 as co-chair) on the Baccalaureate Program Directors Field Education Committee, three current and former field directors recently interviewed her. Our Kudos for this issue are compiled excerpts from that interview. The full interview is available through StoryCorps at <https://archive.storycorps.org/interviews/reflections-of-a-social-work-field-educator>.]



Riva Zeff, MSW

Over her 50 years of social work practice, Riva worked with children who were in the foster care system and adolescents who were involved in the justice system. Her last 14 years have been as the field director for Seattle University's BSW and MSW programs. Riva reflected on the rewards of helping to establish safe environments where the children could feel secure, attach, and grow. For Riva, it was rewarding to "plant a seed" with the adolescents, knowing that it might not take root until the adolescent

matured and then have the individual contact her later to let her know that the “seed” took and they grew. Another big highlight of her career occurred when she became a social work educator and contributed to the development of future social workers; watching them “learn skills and become really comfortable with themselves” and “become amazing social workers.”

Riva has been impacted by the idea “that you get to see students move through a system [and] developmental stages and learn skills and become really comfortable with themselves. [...] you planted that seed and they are amazing social workers.” She reflected on her greatest accomplishment as “planting seeds little by little” to watch someone go through metamorphosis of who they are today to who they will be later. “It is impactful to know you have impacted someone’s life in a really small way. I don’t ever think I did it in a large way or that I was responsible for anyone’s change, I was part of a group, we are always part of a community and it takes all of us to move a person. To know I had a small part in it is, I think, my biggest accomplishment.”

Asked about her greatest challenge, Riva noted, “when a student would talk about difficulties they were having in their internship in the classroom to an instructor who was not responsible or familiar with the student placement. In the department meeting the faculty raised concerns about a student and internship.. [...] As field director I didn’t know the answers but I let the faculty know I would find out. I’d follow up and get more information. I’d listen to the instructor, student, and agency field instructor [...] Overcoming the challenge is to first of all know I don’t have to have the answers but I will find out and secondly, to have a process and follow it.”

One of the biggest lessons Riva highlighted was not feeling that she had sole responsibility for the program. “Field directors work both independently but yet knowing that you are part of a team, you are part of a community [...] that not everything is up to you, you have allies and people behind you that are there to help you. If there are things in the program that aren’t working, you have to work collaboratively with your team to fix them.” Riva stated, “If I can bring out the best in my team, they will help me have the best program.”

Riva noted the program director who hired her was a strong mentor, especially in how to navigate the university system and distinguishing her role with students as opposed to clients. She mentored students as she helped them learn. “What’s amazing is to hear students come back and say ‘you were my mentor.’”

Selected to be part of the Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) Field Education Committee, Riva identified people on that committee as being her mentors because,

“We have all been in the same situations. These mentors have been life-giving and really pushing me forward [...] good mentors help one be more creative and look at situations through different eyes.” As an example, she cited the difficulty of placing a student who really isn’t ready for field practicum. Riva highlighted the importance of consulting with other field directors who have experience and share the perspective that the students will be working with agencies and clients. “We need those agencies, we are the ones that nurture them because without them, our students don’t have internships and if we give them students that are detrimental to their agency, they are not going to want to work with us. So, the field director has to balance the needs of the students, the needs of the program, and the needs of the agency. It’s really nice to know what others have done in similar situations.”

“When I started as a field director I needed to know that even though you are by yourself you are not by yourself” said Riva. “You don’t need to know everything. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Look at the research and see what has been written to inform the work and don’t be afraid to write down your own experiences and consult. We ask students to keep agendas and reflective narratives about their own experiences and use them in the future. We have competing demands on our time as a field director but we need to take the time, slow down, be intentional and mindful of what we are doing [...] It’s important to the university that our program sends out students who are supported. Students are important but agencies are just as important. Agencies rely on being able to reach you. Your relationship with agencies is what keeps them coming back to work with you and sustains your program.”

Riva hopes to continue mentoring students as a liaison. “In retirement, I hope to travel, read novels, watch trashy movies or TV, and be present for my husband, my children with their growing families, my friends, and my communities.”

Riva’s presence on the BPD Field Education Committee has been marked by enthusiasm and hard work. She has organized and participated in the annual BPD pre-conference New Field Director Training as well as identified and brought in nationally known board-sponsored speakers. Her passion for field and dedication to students has influenced many generations of new field directors. She is co-author with Lynn Kaersvang and Miriam Raskin of the “Placing Students” chapter in *Social Work Field Directors: Foundations for Excellence*¹. Riva’s leadership, warm mentoring, and humor will be missed.

¹Hunter, C. A., Moen, J. K., & Raskin, M. (2015). *Social work field directors: Foundations for excellence*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books, Inc.