

Aularian Features

Aularians Working in Social Care

With degrees in Law and PPE respectively, Polly Cowan (2002) and David Jones (1969) have gone on to careers in social care. Here they discuss the professional benefits of their time at the Hall.



Polly Cowan (2002, Law)

SOCIAL WORK doesn't always come to mind as the first career choice after obtaining your law degree.

I have worked in social care since 2006 (one year after leaving Teddy Hall), when I was given a place on a graduate trainee scheme with Barnet Council. The council took on six graduates from different educational and employment backgrounds, all of whom had a common interest in social care. My first two years were as a trainee social worker in a Looked-After Children's team and I am currently being sponsored through my full-time master's in social work at Middlesex University.

Whenever people ask me what I do, and learn that I work within Social Care, they invariably ask what that means and what it entails. For many the stereotypical social worker is an ineffectual figure dressed in a brown cardigan,

determined to interfere with other people's lives. Sadly recent press coverage has done nothing to improve this image. The portrayal of the profession is often negative, encouraging people to believe that social workers either remove children from their families or inadvertently (or incompetently) leave babies to die at the hands of neglectful parents.

In reality, my experience of social workers, as colleagues and as people, couldn't be further removed from these images. Those that I have worked with (and continue to work with) have been dedicated, passionate and acutely aware of the enormous responsibility of their role. Within the profession as a whole, decisions are made solely with the intention of improving people's lives. This includes: supporting parents who struggle to look after their children; implementing care packages for those with physical disabilities; or attempting to improve the quality of life of those isolated from society as a result of their mental illness. All of these decisions must be taken within a strict legislative framework and using very limited resources.

While working in the Looked-After Children's Team I worked with children and young people aged 0-16 who were in the care of the local authority and placed in either children's homes or foster care. My role was to act as a

corporate parent to the children I worked with, championing their needs and ensuring that they were living in suitable and safe placements. I found this to be extremely rewarding although at times incredibly sad.

The knowledge that I gained during my undergraduate course has proved to be immeasurably helpful. The way that I read and write reports, make recommendations, prepare documents, and try to understand the difficulties that some young people and their families are facing is influenced by the skills I obtained during my three years of study. I also am a lot less intimidated by legal processes and the courtroom than many social workers. I feel better placed to act as a well-informed advocate and to be able to deal with the increasingly difficult situations that I am now asked to become involved in.

I feel privileged in many ways and respect the trust that people place in me. The rewards are far from financial but this is made up for by the fact that I look forward to going to work every day. In this economic downturn, many people are moving away from finance and into professions that they may otherwise not have chosen - teaching applications are up dramatically; I hope that social care will also see positive effects.

Perspectives on Shaping a Career

SOME PEOPLE arrive at Oxford with personal ambitions and strategies mapped out. I arrived determined to enjoy Oxford and make something of my life, but open to new experiences and influences. Looking back as I approach 59, it is intriguing to see how my academic choices reflected my interests at the time but also shaped my future. The invitation to the 1969 Gaudy prompted reflection on how the elements of my degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics played into my subsequent career choices. My studies laid a surprisingly practical foundation for a diverse career.

The optional paper in modern social institutions was a good foundation for my MA and professional qualification in social work. The study of the sociology of the family, social structures and social theory stimulated my interest in social action. It led into my social work studies and the concepts informed my doctoral research.

Having qualified in social work, I specialised in child protection and contributed to national policy through my membership of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), which I joined on qualification. I went on to have a national policy role for the NSPCC and then as General Secretary of BASW, a position I held for nine years. During that time I also served as a Member of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), later being employed as CCETSW Director of Opera-

tions. In all of these national roles, and others which followed, my Oxford studies in the history of government, political institutions and theory, and in economics provided a firm foundation.

I had an interest in languages and international issues before coming up, so chose an optional paper on European institutions. I had spent almost a year as a volunteer teacher in East Africa before I started at Oxford, so it also seemed relevant to study development economics. Both provided a helpful preparation for my subsequent international activities, as European and then global President of the International Federation of Social Workers, and also as founding Honorary Secretary General of the Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work. Much social work in the less developed world is engaged in economic and community development.

My fourth optional paper was on industrial relations and labour economics. This provided analytical frameworks for a major study of human resource management in social services: 'People Need People', which I wrote for the Audit Commission and Social Services Inspectorate. This also informed elements of my doctoral thesis (at Warwick University) on inspection and evaluation of social work.

You may wonder why there has been no mention of philosophy so far. I have to admit that I have always felt slightly uncomfortable having a degree in philosophy without ever having sat

a philosophy examination! This is now something I regret; a more systematic grounding in the philosophy of ideas would have been very helpful, not only for my doctorate. I think my year was the only one in which it was necessary to take PPE prelims in only two of the three subjects plus the option of taking core finals papers in only two of the three subjects with four optional papers, thus avoiding one of the three subjects altogether.

I had not expected to find such a close fit between the content of my 1969-1972 undergraduate degree when I looked back on my forty year career in 2009. The linkages seem very clear and the academic grounding provided the foundation for my professional and academic writing, including two books and many papers. I am not sure whether this linkage is typical or even desirable. But in my case, my degree provided a very relevant and productive foundation for a diverse career, in ways which could not have been foreseen! I also enjoyed it at the time!

David Jones has completed doctoral research at Warwick University. He is the Editor of 'Understanding Child Abuse' and joint author of 'Management and Social Work'. He has been an adviser in the Departments of Health and of Education and has just been appointed Deputy Director (Children) in Ofsted. He is President of the International Federation of Social Workers (2006-2010).

David Jones (1969, PPE)