Listening, Not Just Hearing

Family Therapy Students Provide Community Support

By Molly Petrilla
Every Monday and Friday for nearly a year, Michelle Weiss, MFT '15, left her home in Huntingdon Valley, Pa., and headed to an old Victorian mansion in Northwest Philly.

She’d step in, say a few hellos, then slip into her office. There was no receptionist outside the door, no stereotypical “therapy couch” tucked in the corner, but inside that room, Weiss helped people heal.

One of those people, Tanisha Carter, met with Weiss weekly. In spite of her master’s degree, Carter found herself with no job and nowhere to live last summer. She connected with the Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network (PIHN), which provides temporary emergency housing to those who need it. Thanks to a Jefferson master’s program, PIHN is able to offer something else, too: an on-site therapist.

“She understood things that I couldn’t even explain,” Carter says of Weiss. “Her caring and compassion and spirituality have helped me discover myself. I’m not afraid to really reveal myself to her. When I cried, she cried with me.”

As she counseled Carter and others in the PIHN day center, Weiss also worked toward a Master’s in Family Therapy (MFT) at Jefferson. A collaborative effort between the College of Health Professions and the Council for Relationships, the program sends its students out to local schools, homeless shelters and social welfare organizations as part of their requisite clinical experience. It’s often a transformational experience for both the counselors and their clients.

Kenneth Covelman, PhD, chair of the Department of Couple and Family Therapy, says students begin working with clients about three months into the program. He acknowledges that’s on the early side, but “we believe that seeing clients and being in academia at the same time is the best way to learn.”

In shelters and temporary housing facilities, “the problems are endless and the resources are few,” he adds. “This is a very underserved population. From a mental health perspective, it’s been almost neglected. We think we’re doing something important and useful for them, and the shelters in general have really welcomed our input. We also think our students learn a tremendous amount from it.”

**Joining with JeffHOPE**

Women and their families arrive at the Eliza Shirley House in crisis.

Some have escaped abusive situations. Others are grieving — they’ve lost homes, jobs, loved ones. They have nowhere to
live, and Eliza Shirley is their first stop on a difficult journey. They bring their children and stay for a month or two in the Center City facility, then typically go into long-term City of Philadelphia housing programs.

When a woman comes to Eliza Shirley, some of the first people she tells about her past may be Jefferson students. Jefferson’s Sidney Kimmel Medical College has offered a weekly, student-run JeffHOPE clinic there since 2007, providing free adult and pediatric care to shelter residents. This year, MFT students joined their medical counterparts.

“If the med students realize a woman would benefit from talking, or if she marked on her [medical] sheet that she is depressed, they recommend her to us,” says Megan Freeman, MFT’15, who counseled women at Eliza Shirley throughout her second year in the Jefferson master’s program. “The med students were the ones who said they thought it would be helpful to get some therapists in there.”

Freeman says the shelter’s short-term status was a challenge for therapy. Often, she’d see a woman just once for a counseling session.

“At first it feels like you want to fix it all in one session, which is impossible,” she says. “It’s also hard to gain these women’s trust in such a short amount of time.” The solution? “We listen. We spend a lot of time just hearing them out, then take some time at the end to strategize next steps and develop some positive coping skills.”

A Multi-Faceted Problem

In its annual report to Congress last year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) revealed that 15,333 people were homeless in Pennsylvania on a single night in January 2014. (For comparison, that’s more than the populations of Bryn Mawr and Chestnut Hill, Pa., combined.)

Mental illness is one of the most commonly cited causes of homelessness for single people. But in some cases, mental health issues can be the effect rather than the cause.

“Living in these shelters is very difficult for people,” Covelman says. “Just having somebody to talk with about what they’re experiencing is huge. They need somebody who will sit and listen to them.”

Through the MFT program, “we’re taking the services to the people and meeting with them in settings where mental health services are not on offer,” says Sara Corse, PhD, a Jefferson professor who created and now directs the community partnership initiative.

As Covelman put it, the problems are endless. Jefferson MFT students have helped their clients work through grief and loss, parenting after violence, anger management, improving communication, trauma, abuse, depression and many other issues.

In the two years that student counselors have worked in the PIHN day center, “we see changes, and they’re big changes,”
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says Rachel Falkove, PIHN’s executive director. “We see people learning from their mistakes but not flogging themselves. We see forgiveness. We see better decision-making across the board.”

‘A Huge Gift’
This past academic year, Anika Sawant, MFT ’15, spent her Thursday mornings running a therapeutic support group for women in the People’s Emergency Center (PEC) in West Philadelphia.

Among its social services, PEC offers emergency and transitional housing for single mothers and their young children. When Sawant first started counseling there, she says she was lucky to have two women show up on a given week. By the end of her time, close to 10 women were turning out for each session.

She says PEC’s high turnover rate made it difficult to establish consistency or a group culture at first. On top of that, many of the women didn’t feel comfortable baring their souls to a group of strangers.

“A lot of the topics we discuss are tough issues,” Sawant says. “We’ve worked hard to establish an environment that feels safe and secure, and we’ve learned to create engaging discussions through worksheets and media and hands-on materials.”

Sawant’s group focused on parenting after violence, but she says the issues extended well beyond that: grief and loss, abuse, trauma, anger and emotion regulation problems.

“I’d never worked with this population before,” she says, “and it gave me a new outlook on the complexity of their issues. It also showed me how determined and resilient people can be.”

Covelman calls it “a huge, huge gift” for therapists to see that level of resiliency.

“I think they come away very impressed with people’s determination to make their lives better and their capacity to transcend their situations,” he says of his students.

“It stretches them,” adds Corse, “to be able to sit with much more difficult emotions than they ever thought they could.”

Stripped of the typical waiting room and receptionist and 50-minute timer, the student therapists also learn to create their own systems in an often-chaotic setting. “That makes the students very aware of things they take for granted,” Corse says. “They have to learn about the norms of that new setting and experience themselves as the outsiders.”

Michelle Weiss says her therapy work at PIHN redefined her views of privilege, success and accomplishment. “Until you really get to know people in these situations, it’s easy to think the whole world is like you, even when you go out of your way to teach yourself that it’s not,” she says. She describes Tanisha Carter as “one of the most rewarding people I’ve worked with.”

The experience was equally valuable for Carter. She plans to continue seeing Weiss, who is launching a private practice with several Jefferson classmates.

“I was just really grateful to have that added support,” Carter says. “At the end of every session, she’d tell me, ‘take care of you.’ I finally understand what she meant by that now that I’m in a better place.”