VOICES

: on difference

A student-led journal focusing on issues of social justice

Editors' Note

This year's issue of VOICES takes on both sides of VOICE's masthead, exploring issues of personal identity as well as issues of social justice. Some pieces lean towards one or the other side of this equation: there are "voices" which document a personal investigation of self while other "voices" explore and reveal issues around economic injustice. And then too there are pieces which interfuse these two realms, exploring social justice and identity simultaneously. What emerges as a result of these diverse voices coming together here is a compelling, multifaceted picture of both the harrowing post-2008 financial collapse landscape that social workers continue to contend with today and a mosaic of individual people of conscience finding their way forward inside this landscape on the road to becoming 21st century social workers.

Cover back photo credit: Bridget McGovern, MSW Candidate '14

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Let Them Eat. . . Nothing
~ Sally Eberhardt

For many people of conscience and people facing poverty across the United States, autumn 2013 marked a new all-time low in the relentless, devastating cuts to federal assistance that have followed in the continuing aftermath of the 2008 global financial collapse. In November, federal food stamp benefits in the United States were cut by $5 billion dollars for the upcoming fiscal year. Beyond providing crucial help to those who lack sufficient financial resources to feed themselves, food stamps often play a critical role in a life of nutrition versus a life of malnutrition. Political analyst Gary Younge (2013) argues that these cuts have nothing to do with offering genuine solutions to the fiscal crisis and everything to do with an ongoing ideological battle against poor Americans. Considering what budget cuts have looked like since 2008, this argument not only appears to be sharply accurate, it also points towards what looks like a continuing trend ahead in US politics. The most vulnerable in society are made to bear the brunt of the global recession and capitalism's excesses (for one local example, see Amanda Hough's Philadelphia public school "crisis" piece on Page 12), while massive tax breaks and concessions continue to be doled out to corporations and the "1%" so that they can keep amassing what are now historic levels of profits and personal wealth. Of course, thinking back over the past three decades, this "current trend" is actually nothing new as we can easily recall media spins and policy initiatives on both sides of the aisle that heaped capitalism's damage control on those at the bottom of the economic scale: Ronald Reagan's infamous and paradigm-shifting "welfare queens" PR campaign and Bill Clinton's shameful "welfare reform" are just two that spring to mind. The difference now is the heightened nature of the equation, most notably the unconscionable levels of corporate "wealth" (others, including the current Pope and other religious leaders, would likely use the word "greed") that we are witnessing.

In 2012, Charles Munger, vice-chairman of US billionaire Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway company, made national headlines when he argued the United States was doing right when it bailed out Wall Street and let poor Americans take on the burden of budget cuts: "There's a danger in just shoveling out money to people who say, 'My life is a little harder than it used to be.' At a certain place you've got to say to the people, 'Suck it in and cope, buddy. Suck it in and cope'" (quoted in Younge, 2013). One wonders exactly what Munger means when he uses the word "cope."

"We are killing the poor in the many other ways that social workers know all too well."

Following the 2008 collapse and the havoc it wrecked, food stamp use in the United States exploded – from just over 26 million recipients in 2007 to almost 47 million in 2012, an astonishing increase of 77% (Resnikoff, 2013). Even more arresting: nearly half the recipients are children (Sevenson & Hu, 2013). Current government figures indicate that one in seven Americans is food insecure and, according to an August 2013 Gallup poll, one in five Americans said that they have, at times during the past year, lacked money to buy food that they or their families needed (Younge, 2013). Harrowing data like this indicates poor Americans have indeed been "sucking it in" – and then some – for the past six years at the same moment corporate wealth has skyrocketed. Recent headlines from even the most zealous of corporate media including the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes Magazine* provide a powerful shorthand for this persistent state of affairs: "1-in-3 People Experienced Poverty From 2009 to 2011" (*Wall Street Journal*, January 7, 2014); "The 85 Richest People In The World Have As Much Wealth As The 3.5 Billion Poorest" (*Forbes*, January 23, 2014); and "Goldman: Corporate Profits Grew Five Times Faster Than Wages in 2013" (*Businessweek*, January 24, 2014). Younge cites Marcia Potts' powerful September 2013 *American Prospect* article about rising mortality rates amongst poor and working-class white American women, noting in plain language what must be understood by all those working with poor communities in the United States: "Lack of access to education, medical care, good wages, and healthy food isn't just leaving the worst-off Americans behind. It's killing them."

Delving deeper into the ideological campaign behind "austerity" politics, Younge recalls comments made by Republican Paul Ryan (who is currently trying to cultivate himself as anti-poverty crusader) in March 2012 about his own welfare philosophy: "We don't want to turn the safety net into a hammock that lulls able-bodied people into lives of dependency and complacency. That drains them of their will and their incentive to make the most of their lives." As Younge notes, currently 40% of households using food stamps have *at least* one person working, piercing through ideological mumbo jumbo about dependency and complacency. One could easily argue here that Ryan should be applying his dictum not to poor Americans who are trying to supplement unlivable wages so that they can feed themselves and their children, but instead to the banks that have been bailed out by taxpayers and

the multinational corporations that continue to receive head-spinning tax breaks. And of course, more than four decades of neoliberalism's carving away at real wages have also taken their enormous toll; as news reports and national studies continue to show, we are living in a world where median wages have consistently plummeted at the same time top corporate earners and corporation profits have soared. And yet, somehow, the response to this ever-growing imbalance has continued to be to attack programs for poor and working-poor Americans.

In 1980, at the start of what we can now look back on as the dawn of the frightening new era of neoliberalism spearheaded by Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the West Coast punk band The Dead Kennedys penned the dark, deeply satirical song "Kill the Poor" and sang – with eerie prescience – about a world in which conservatives and liberals alike (note the reference to Jane Fonda) united around the basic principle that the poor would have to bear the brunt of economic "austerity" measures and the rich (and those who aspired to be "the rich") gleefully took power into their own hands in order to eradicate the problems of the welfare state:

<div align="center">

The sun beams down on a brand new day

No more welfare tax to pay

Unsightly slums gone up in flashing light

Jobless millions whisked away

At last we have more room to play

All systems go to kill the poor tonight

Kill kill kill kill kill the poor tonight

Behold the sparkle of champagne

The crime rate's gone

Feel free again

O' life's a dream with you, Miss Lily White

Jane Fonda on the screen today

Convinced the liberals it's okay

So let's get dressed and dance away the night

Kill kill kill kill kill the poor tonight.

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While the armed guards of the rich may not be shooting the disenfranchised in the streets (and given the trend of police shootings of alleged suspects and "stand your ground" murders over the past six years, one could reasonably argue this point), we are killing the poor in the many other ways that social workers know all too well: food stamp cuts, unlivable wages, foreclosures, substandard medical care, and the many other cuts to federal assistance we have seen in action. Kill the poor? You don't need guns to do it, just a strong neoliberal ideology that can do the work for you.

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The Possibility of Happiness
~ Kathryn Graham

When I left high school, I thought I was ready for anything. After all, I had been captain of this, president of that, and even homecoming queen of the small, predominantly white, suburban high school I attended. When I got to college, I found out how ill prepared I was for almost everything I encountered. As a nursing major, I found my classmates to be very competitive and no one wanted to study together. As an African-American student I learned for the second time in my life that I was different. I hadn't felt that way since I was five. Having been so popular in high school, I suddenly felt a void that led me to start bonding with fellow African-American students. This unfortunately was also a learning experience, for I was ostracized for being too light, having long hair, and not being in the remedial program in which most African-American students were required to enroll. So I focused more on social comforts instead of my studies. Needless to say, I did not do well in school. My grades suffered and depression soon followed as well as severe stress and sickness that eventually led to surgery. That was just the excuse I needed. I dropped out of school vowing never to return to that university. I moved to Florida, then Texas, found minimum wage jobs, and made some new friends. I lived through the best and worst of times in the six years I was away, but ultimately decided to return to the university to obtain my bachelor's degree.

My second time at the university went much better. I didn't care about making friends or being liked by my peers. I just wanted to get the best grades possible, challenge myself, and take care of my then 14-month-old daughter. After graduation I landed a civil service job with the county. I worked hard and wanted to learn everything I could, but still I hardly understood the difficulties of being a professional African-American woman. After only two years, I was promoted to supervisor, but as I had had difficulties in the past, I always questioned and continue to question any promotion on a job. Is it because I earned it? I have had fellow African-American women that I worked with confirm my suspicions. One woman actually told me I got a promotion because of my light skin. It is more often than not that I am the only African-American woman in my position, so the question always arises, "Am I the token?" Today, while I have a better understanding of the obligatory conflicts that come with being a successful African-American woman, I still have doubts. Have I conformed to societal expectations to move up the ladder? Some of my own family members say I talk "too white." I had a college roommate that once told me that I acted differently when my African-American friends came to our room to visit. I didn't understand at first, but later realized that I needed to move between two worlds to fit in. When around my African-American friends, I had to use Ebonics when speaking, and then switch to "proper" English everywhere else. I would never wear my hair in braids for fear it would look too ethnic. I thought this might hinder any chance for a promotion within a job setting. It seems unfair that I feel like I have to choose between embracing my heritage or getting a good job; I often question if I have made such a sacrifice.

When I start a new job, I always go out of my way to speak to African-American custodians, security guards, and cafeteria workers. I tell myself it is because

Between Worlds

I got a promotion!
Did I really earn it?
Or am I the token
That the company requires?
Some say I talk too white.
Do I have to speak Ebonics to be accepted?
So I must choose heritage or journeying to another world
A short natural coif or long relaxed hair
Which will land me the job?
Hello black security guard/custodian/cafeteria worker
You are my people and I am no better than you
Am I obliged to befriend every black person in the building
Or is it comforting to feel the warm embrace from my peeps as I enter the new world?
Is it that I need you to know me; to like me
Or do I yearn for your acceptance for abandoning you?
Is it my light skin that bothers you?
Sorry can't change that
It doesn't mean that I'm not just as black
Finding balance between worlds
Only comes with time and maturation
Will you be my friend?

my mother, at one point in her life, worked as a custodian to support our family and I am no better than anyone in those positions. But now I wonder if it is really me just trying to be accepted. It may also be because there are usually so few of us, I feel obligated to "make friends" with every African-American person in the building. I have noticed a similar separation in my classmates. It may not be because we are in supervisor/subordinate positions with each other, but perhaps my lighter skin color plays a role. Could it be that I talk too much in class? Do I still need people to be my friend? It all goes back to that first day in kindergarten when another little girl asked me if I was black or white. When I responded, "black," she skipped away and played with someone else. That was the first time I felt that maybe being black wasn't good. Later, I found ways to keep myself small and unnoticed, like in fourth grade, when I found ways to sabotage my way out of the enrichment program and the spelling bee because I didn't want to be seen as a smart kid, or more likely, I didn't feel like I belonged there.

Although most of my life I did conform to societal rules, I finally feel able to break free from the feeling that I need to fit in. I am embracing my heritage more. I cut off my relaxed hair that flowed past my shoulders in exchange for a more natural styled coif. Am I taking a risk with this? Maybe. But I am trying to find a balance between being African-American and being successful. These things are not mutually exclusive, yet my experiences have led me to believe I needed to make a choice. I am not there yet, but I now know more than ever that I am not alone. In my future work with my MSW degree, I am especially interested in empowering women to overcome issues of low self-esteem, domestic violence, substance abuse, and other plights women face. I know for sure that second chances can give people a sense of hope, and the possibility of happiness. For me, self-reflection has been the key to maintaining balance "between worlds."

We Catholics
~ Maggie Hegney

These illustrations depict a culture that I am intimately familiar with, but that I have also struggled with in regards to identification and affirmation. Although my view of myself in relation to the surrounding world incorporates diverse perspectives and connections, being Catholic has heavily influenced my understanding of selfhood and community. These complexities are central to this exploration of my identity as a social worker and as a member of a culture that has informed my search for meaning, empowerment, and social change. For me, this project is a way to consider how "we" Catholics make sense of the world – and how the world makes sense of us. The method reflects the reality – the paintings are somewhat clumsy because sometimes identity work is too. The figures might look sad or bewildered or comic, but they are endowed with purpose. As I engage in the experience of constructing my social work identity, I experience my "self" as culturally bound, but also reflexively motivated as an emerging professional. This purpose – to recognize that the culture of Catholicism has framed my experiences and perspectives – is deeply tied to my use of self. My aim, then, is to show that the comic can mask the austere and that our subjectivity can both empower and limit us. I hope my paintings show that you can both revere and critically examine where you are from and who you are.

What Would You Do?: Exploring Sex Work
~ Julia Spevak

Upon entering West Chester University's Masters of Social Work program, I had never heard of the term "sex work" and always thought of prostitution as illegal and immoral. Sex work is a relatively new term, introduced in the 1970s by Scarlot Harlot, a prostitute and women's rights advocate (Grant, 2013). Referring to prostitution as sex work, a more progressive and positive term, is a new concept to me and made me uncomfortable at first. When I decided to pursue a career in social work, it never dawned on me that I may have the chance to work with sex workers and I was close-minded to the possibility of engaging with this community. Once becoming more familiar with the development and rationale for sex work, I believe I have a better understanding of sex work and the importance of seeing these women as human beings and not solely defined by their profession.

Early social work reform for "socially deviant" women focused on emphasizing the importance of "Anglo-Saxon gender norms and behaviors," (Abrams & Curren, 2004) which presumably excluded immoral sexual acts such as prostitution. When the social work field first addressed sex work, social workers determined that prostitution was immoral, an action no sane woman would ever choose to engage in unless seduced or coerced by a man (Wahab, 2002). This viewpoint intrinsically characterized prostitution as demeaning and involuntary. It never occurred to the early social worker that some women choose to have sex for money of their own free will. Early social workers, it appears, could only comprehend sex work in a way that was involuntary because it made them uncomfortable.

As social workers continued to address sex work, they maintained their perspective of women being forced into the profession as if the women had no choice in the matter. Instead of attempting to reform the profession and advocate for women's rights, they focused on the women's seemingly socially deviant behaviors. Even when it was conceivable for women to *choose* such a profession, society rationalized their behaviors by labeling them, "sick," "neurotic," or even having an "unresolved Oedipus conflict" (Wahab, 2002, p. 50).

It is not a coincidence that many women targeted in early sex work interventions came from low socioeconomic status (Abrams & Curran, 2004). The notion of women pursuing sex work only for economic reasons is so embedded in our society that even popular music conveys this message. As the hip-hop group City High affirms, even a mother may pursue sex work to provide for her son because she believes, "The only way to feed him is to sleep with a man for a little bit of money" (2001). While this may support economic motivations for sex work, there are other factors to consider. It is not fair to judge sex work as a profession that is only chosen because women have a lack of resources such as money. There is a double standard that exists in our society around sex; men choose to have sex for pleasure while women primarily choose to have sex to make their partners happy, have children, or because they are coerced. When women choose to have sex and/or have multiple partners because it is pleasurable, they run the risk of being labeled as "whores" or "sluts." Our society tends to ignore the fact that male sex workers exist as well.

After reading scholarly articles and the research presented on reasons for sex work, I think one major motive has been excluded. How many women would still choose to go into sex work regardless of economic motivations? What about women who come from middle- or upper-class families that choose sex work as a profession due to simple enjoyment and not because of other factors such as escaping abuse? Conducting a study on sex workers by comparing those who had the choice of another profession with those who did not feel they had a choice would be a valuable contribution to social work research.

> "...we are in a unique position as every person has the potential to be the next Scarlot Harlot, shaping and paving the way for basic human rights advocacy."

Another consideration behind the established ideology behind sex work is the inequality of social workers' gender representation. The social work profession has always been predominantly female, especially when it comes to social reform issues such as sex work. Abrams and Curren (2004) report that more than two-thirds of the social work profession was comprised of women in the early 1900s and the unequal gender representation for the social work profession is still present today. I question how this has impacted the perception of prostitution today.

As a social worker, when working with sex workers, it is crucial not to make assumptions about why a client chooses sex work. I have never been in a situation where I felt sex work was my only option of making a living and providing for children, due to the privileges I have been given. Although I would never choose to go into the profession for reasons of pleasure, it is still a possibility that some sex workers choose the profession simply because they enjoy sex.

In addition, as social workers, we have the potential to become more empathetic and open-minded as we gain more exposure to different situations, particularly when it is a situation, or client's background, that makes us uncomfortable. Being a new professional to the social work field, I will inevitably be faced with communities that make me uncomfortable, such as the sex worker community. However, when facing this challenge, I must consider that we are in a unique position as every person has the potential to be the next Scarlot Harlot, shaping and paving the way for basic human rights advocacy.

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The Funeral Pyre in Philadelphia
~ Amanda Hough

In a troubling article from September 2013 entitled "Why Philadelphia Schools Will Close Their Doors Forever," writer Jay McClung put forward a grim prediction that all public schools in the Philadelphia School District will be shut down within the next two years due to the tremendous, spiraling debt that is subsuming the District. As I was reading McClung's sobering assessment, my mind began to draw parallels to a text written almost 200 years before McClung and the Philadelphia schools "crisis" – *An Act Prohibiting the Teaching of Slaves to Read.* Written by the General Assembly of North Carolina in 1831 in order to maintain total control over slaves, this harrowing piece of American legislation dictated that the prevention of literacy amongst slaves was crucial in helping to quell slaves' "dissatisfaction" which would inevitably result in "insurrection and rebellion" against slave owners. Despite the abolition of slavery in the 1860s, the practice of depriving those perceived as inferior of an adequate education in order to maintain some type of control over them still seems disturbingly prevalent today.

Absorbing the responsibility of the Philadelphia School District in 2001, and yet continuously failing to stem its hurtling debt, the State of Pennsylvania has systematically failed to treat the education of Philadelphia youth as a priority, thus treating these children as substandard. With continuing political decisions like the ones seen over the past few years in Philadelphia, it seems as though society is relentlessly punishing people who live in poorer Philadelphia communities, sending them the message that the inferior quality of their children's education is a direct result of their diminutive stature in society. In other words: education is a privilege only for those who can afford it. As national commentators Travis Smiley and Cornel West have noted in their 2012 book, *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, many high-ranking politicians feel it is their duty to protect the rich by ensuring the poor's dependence on welfare, which can certainly be accomplished by making sure they remain undereducated and, therefore, unemployable.

> *"...education is a privilege only for those who can afford it."*

The current situation in Philadelphia's public school system appears to be a current-day example of yet another authoritarian group in the United States diminishing the educational opportunities of the poor and the disenfranchised, effectively preventing them from some day climbing out of poverty and low social and economic class. It is both absurd and horrifying that public schools in Philadelphia are on the brink of being completely shut down, while public schools in more affluent communities, such as Penncrest High School in Media and Lower Merion High School in Ardmore, can afford such luxuries as new iPads and laptops for each of their students. The system in place in Pennsylvania shows blatant favoritism for the wealthy at the expense of the education and subsequent lives of the poor youth, which is reprehensible and unacceptable. As social workers, I think it is paramount that we fight to raise awareness of the institutional racism inherent within the Philadelphia school system, and demand radical changes in the funding of public schools in impoverished areas. Education is a right for all, not a privilege for the elite; but this message will continue to be unheard unless we take action.
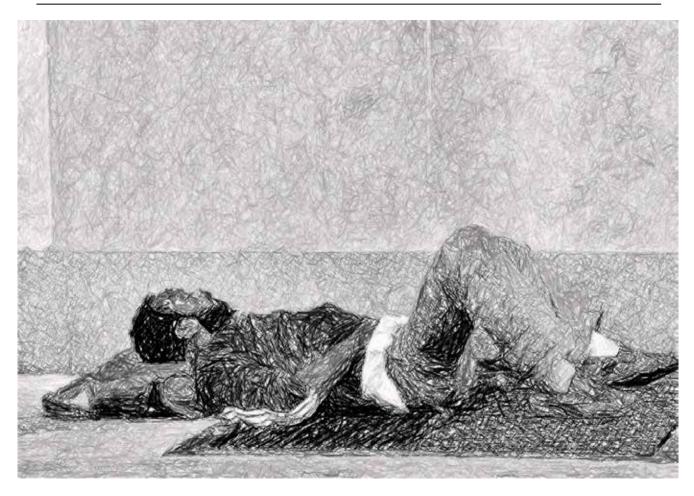
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This image, taken in a busy, populated area of Philadelphia, speaks volumes. The man is alone, and sleeping on an average street in the city. Is he homeless, using a knapsack as a pillow with only the clothes on his back? The image itself appears gritty and dirty and one may wonder if he has been homeless for a while. What this image communicates is that even though social problems like homelessness are so visible, this man remains invisible to most everyone that walks by him. Many avoid the issue of homelessness, averting their eyes in an attempt not to see it.

Contributors

Sally Eberhardt, MA, MSW Candidate '15, is a first-year, full-time career changer. She received her BA in English and Philosophy at Fordham University and her MA in English (Literary History and Cultural Discourse) from the University of Sussex in the UK. Building on many years of professional experience in the field of international justice and human rights and activist work including anti-war campaigning, organizing with economic and social rights movements, and participation in Occupy Philadelphia, Sally looks forward to bringing her activist sensibility into work with her local community as a geriatric social worker in Philadelphia.

Kathryn Graham, MSW Candidate '15, is a first-year student in West Chester University's full-time program. Kathryn has nearly ten years of experience working with individuals and families with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities as a Supports Coordination Supervisor and Fiscal Liaison. She continues to provide private consultation in that area. Kathryn hopes to expand her experiences with her MSW degree and earn an LCSW in order to work in family counseling, focusing her practice on empowering women.

Maggie Hegney is a first-year, full-time Master of Social Work candidate at West Chester University. She graduated from Temple University in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology and a Women's Studies minor. Maggie is interested in the way cultural factors intersect with identity formation, and enjoys painting in her free time. She is passionate about social work practice with older adults, and looks forward to a career in case management and program development.

Casey Henninger, MSW candidate '15, is a first-year, full-time MSW student at West Chester University. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music from Susquehanna University. She has recently worked in a Continuing Care Retirement Community and is interested in working in Gerontology. Casey teaches piano lessons and enjoys working with her students and their families. Casey is passionate about photography and would like to use it in her future career. She is looking forward to a career in social work and hopes to learn more about direct practice with individuals and families.

Amanda Hough, MSW Candidate '15, is in her first year as a full-time MSW student at West Chester University. She has received her BA in Psychology from Boston University, and worked as a mental health counselor on an acute short-term adolescent psychiatric unit in Boston prior to starting her graduate program. She hopes to use her degree to provide counseling for adolescent trauma victims, as well as adult batterers.

Bridget McGovern, MSW Candidate '14, is a full-time employee at Community Behavioral Health; a non-profit insurance company overseeing behavioral health services for Philadelphia residents. Bridget advocates on behalf of members and acts as a liaison between provider agencies and the consumer community. Bridget has over ten years experience in providing Philadelphia community mental health center services including case management, crisis intervention and family based services, and as a social services contact in several Philadelphia public schools. Bridget is currently interning at the Aquinas Center in South Philadelphia where she runs a youth group, assists with community organizing, and provides case management for immigrant families seeking legal counsel at the center.

Julia Spevak, MSW Candidate '15, is a first-year full-time student at West Chester University. After dedicating a year of service to an Americorps program called City Year, working with underprivileged youth in a high-needs high school, she has developed a strong passion for education equality. She aspires to address this social inequality while working with adolescents. Her long-term goal is to obtain her clinical license in social work.

Calling all Social Justice Advocates!

Please join us in raising our individual and collective voices in the 5th issue of *VOICES*, the West Chester University MSW Program's student-led, peer-reviewed journal.

We are currently seeking personal perspectives on issues of social justice in written format, original art work, photography, and poetry for our Spring 2015 issue. All current and former WCU MSW students are invited to submit. Written submissions should be 1,000 words or less, double-spaced, 12-pt font with 1- inch margins, APA style and include a cover page with contact information.

All submissions are "blind" reviewed by the Student Editors – your name is not attached in any way during the review process. If accepted for publication, you will be notified by the Faculty Advisor and then contacted by one of the Student Editors. All submissions are due (electronically) to the Faculty Advisor by a date TDB in Fall 2014/Winter 2015.

We hope you will become a part of this important and inspiring project about things that matter to us as social workers.

Student Editors: Sally Eberhardt, Maggie Hegney, Bridget McGovern

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