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Social Workers Stand Up

When I was an undergraduate student studying psychology and contemplating how I wanted to spend my professional life, someone said to me, “Whatever you do, just don’t become a social worker.” I laughed and said that I certainly wouldn’t, because I had no desire to work for Child Protective Services. In the few years since that conversation, I learned so much about the social work profession, applied to social work programs and am finishing my fourth internship in the social work field.

As I think back on that discussion and my repulsion at the idea of becoming a social worker, I am consistently amazed at how little I knew about the field. I was a student in a school of social and behavioral sciences and I didn’t have a good idea about what social workers do. How could people outside human services have any idea what social workers do, then? I am constantly amazed at the scope and depth of the projects, cases and developments that social workers are involved with, but how little the public knows about those social workers making it happen. Social workers are the silent warriors, doing great work with very little recognition.

In order for social workers to be better understood and promoted, it is important for social workers, especially students, to be more involved in our communities, and not just in the agencies we work in. There is no shortage of social work students on Long Island, and if we banded together, we would be quite a force. On Long Island, we face a heroin epidemic, we have communities of immigrants who are terrified of deportation, we have veterans desperate for quality healthcare and housing after their service to the country. These are just three causes that students, together, could make a difference in. There are hundreds of Long Island students in the handful of social work programs in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Social work students are a community but we are not united or joined together yet.

My vision for social work students on Long Island is that we become visible and loud. I envision us at rallies and protests, not only holding up signs about feminism or how black lives do matter, but about why, as social workers, those and many other causes matter to us. I envision swarms of social work students taking to the streets in order to voice our opinion, but I think it needs to be done in an organized and united manner. Instead of one “Social Worker for Social Justice” sign at a rally, what if we had 400 or more, marching together, raising our voices? That is the vision I have for Long Island social work students. Even more, I think that we should be

encouraged, possibly through school work and curriculum, to attend these important events and rallies happening all around us in a controversial time.

If we're going to be social workers, I think we must be willing to stand up for social justice causes in a vocal and loud way. When my fellow social work students and I become vocal about our beliefs and the causes we support, the message that must be included is one about how we are social workers. There are very few professions who have the firsthand experience that social workers have about the effects of injustice, however we are very often overlooked and not heard. When we participate, we must profess our professional career with pride; we should be writing into columns about our positions on social issues and our credibility should be our professional studies. Long Island is a place with plenty of privilege, but it's also home to a lot of discrimination and power discrepancy. We, as social work students, have to take part in making our communities better.

The National Association of Social Workers tells us that "Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems." Students are lectured about the movements of days' past and advances in therapy made, however we must be a part of the changes going on now, and we must do so vocally. Social workers have changed the world and the world deserves to know about it. We don't just work for Child Protective Services... we work for veterans, we advocate for the elderly; we work in hospitals; we assist in immigration services; we stand with the differently abled; we are part of the education of our children; we deliver mental health and substance use treatment; we create policy; we start movements; we enact change.

My name is Elizabeth Hehir and I am currently enrolled in the MSW program at Stony Brook University, where I hold a 3.9 GPA. I affirm that I meet the requirements to receive the NASW scholarship and, if chosen, can uphold the requirements of participation in chapter meetings.