

Celebrating With You
Social Work Month
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Journal

NEWS

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ARE CIVILIANS EXPERIENCING PTSD?

Opinion by Shauna L Smith, MSW, MFT

Can we civilians at home dare say we are experiencing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder when our military men and women, true wearers of the designation, learn the language of murder and mayhem everyday while we in our armchairs or kitchens or at rallies practice just the challenge of inconveniences and the assimilation of horror tales from afar?

Do PTSD symptoms such as shock, fearfulness, nightmares, avoidance, despondency and loss of faith apply to some degree to us, the bystanders, the observers, the ones who watch in disbelief, feeling helpless to effect change?

We who are not having our nerve tested daily by shattered bullets and dry sand nonetheless feel the fine particles in our nightmares, infiltrating our food and drink, our daily bread. We nonetheless feel the chaos and pathos of our world as we know it crumbling in a maze of contradictions and secrets and lies.

We are painfully aware of the exigencies of the hungry and impoverished, the despair of the needlessly

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Sharon Smith explores the Iraqi War's stress on civilians. See Ellen Broms article regarding peace in Iraq on page 8.

E.D.'s REPLY AFFIRMS NASW-CA WORK

I offered a view against advertising for DMH in the last issue. Your answer was that you need the money and are not for or against any ad. As a member, that is not enough.

The state has been active in hurting our members. Have you even offered support to state social workers? Has NASW-CA? Women's Council? Jane Addams Council? Clinical Social Worker Association?

As much as I agree with all of the above groups you and they fail to see that social work is done mostly by social Workers. If social workers are not supported, neither is their work or clients. To support social workers is to support our clients.

Chuck Christensen

Executive Director's Reply:

Dear Mr. Christensen:

I'm sorry that you feel NASW hasn't done enough to support state social workers. We believe otherwise.

Over the years we have been very supportive of state social workers

See E.D.'S REPLY page 2

FINDING PURPOSE IN THE PAIN

By Harmony Dust, MSW

A UCLA MSW, Harmony Dust, 30, is a social worker briefly in the DCFS system as a youth, overcame extreme obstacles as a child and young woman but went on to work for DCFS as a professional social worker and is now working full-time in the nonprofit she founded that offers hope to women in the hard situation where Harmony once was. This is her story. Names and identifying information have been changed.

Normally feisty, Alexis, a 13-year-old girl with downcast eyes, sat in the kitchen of a group home in Los Angeles. Her hands were tucked protective-



Harmony Dust, MSW

ly into the pockets of her black bomber jacket, gripping used sanitary napkins she was too embarrassed to throw into a trash can when staying in a strange man's home. I searched for the best

Let's just say that my home environment was not fit for a happy sitcom like "The Cosby Show."

way to approach her. I felt insecure in my abilities as a residential counselor as I had only worked in the group home for a few months.

With fading hope that she had been safe I said, "You've been gone for a week now. Where have you been?"

Her brown eyes, brimming with tears met mine. I knew by the pain in her face that she couldn't answer. Not yet.

A few days later, Alexis approached me. "You wanna know where I was? I was working in a strip club and the owner let me and some other girls live with him. He was nice at first, but he started pimping us."

I felt my heart sink deep into my stomach. Flashes of my own life working as a stripper entered my mind as I wondered what this girl might have

been subjected. In the end, Alexis's silence prevented me from intervening in any tangible way. She feared for her life and refused to tell me the name of the strip club or the man who violated her for profit.

The damage done to her and so many other young women and children pained me. I began to see the intersection between what I had endured throughout my life and my desire to help others.

I had been sexually abused and raped by multiple people, men and women. At 14, I was raped on several

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Finding Purpose

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occasions by an ex-boyfriend. And let's just say that my home environment was not fit for a happy sitcom like "The Cosby Show."

I felt empty and hollow. My hopes of ever being loved and cherished were crushed. I knew nothing of what a healthy relationship was supposed to feel like. At 15, involved with a young man who, with emotional and sometimes physical abuse, validated every horrible thing I believed about myself.

Still, my fear of abandonment ran so deep there was nothing I would not do to keep him in my life, including supporting him financially and turning a blind eye to his extracurricular affairs. I maxed out every credit card I had in an attempt to buy his love and devotion. No matter how much money I gave him, it was never enough.

By the time I was 19, I was \$35,000 in debt and near bankruptcy. The only solution I could see was to become an exotic dancer. I told one of my psychology professors—for whom I had a deep respect—about my dilemma. I hoped that he would dissuade me. Instead he encouraged me, telling me I would never have to include it in my résumé.

He revealed his motives when, a month later, he showed up at the strip club where I worked.

I hoped that, in stripping, I would find a way to take back control of my life. To my dismay, my life only spiraled deeper into a place of pain and despair as I found myself subjected to further objectification and the constant leering of men who cared nothing about the broken girl inside me.

Three years later, in 1997, I found solace in friendship.

My life was forever changed. It wasn't until this friend extended her hand and heart to me, showing me unconditional love that I began to have the audacity to hope again. She invited me into her life and showed me her faith by the way she lived it.

I began attending the Oasis Christian Center, a church in Los Angeles, where I was told there is a God who loves me with a wild passion and wants to see my heart healed.

As I began to realize my value, it became more difficult to live any other way.

I explored the possibility of a better life and grew less tolerant of my boyfriend's name-calling and hurtful words.

Dancing naked in front of strangers for dollar bills did not align itself with my new self-image. In time, I gained the courage to quit stripping. Shortly after that, I picked up the phone and made a call that would have seemed impossible in my previous depleted state. I informed my boyfriend that I would no longer be supporting him and that I did not want him in my life anymore.

"But I don't understand," he grasped for answers.

"You don't have to understand, you just have to accept it," were my last words before hanging up the phone.

But as I sat across from Alexis in that group home, I knew that changing my life circumstances was only the beginning of my journey towards healing and restoration.

I continued on in my education, receiving a Bachelor's in Psychology from UCLA. Perhaps equally as significant was my pursuit of health and wholeness in my life, addressing my emotional and spiritual well-being through participation in individual counseling, support groups and reading countless books.

I knew that to effectively help anyone else, I would need more than a great education and diplomas. It was going to take the sweat and tears of working through the psychological toll of my own history of childhood sexual abuse, rape and life as an exotic dancer. Sweat and tears I did shed.

With each step I took towards wholeness I took, my passion and desire to encourage and help other people increased. To further equip myself for this endeavor, I returned to UCLA in 2003 to pursue a Master's degree in Social Welfare.

One warm fall evening soon after, waiting for my husband's flight to land at LA Airport, I found myself sitting in

my car across the street from the very strip club where I had worked. Things were going pretty well for me. I had a great marriage, wonderful friends; I had just started graduate school and was set to work for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) upon graduation. My life seemed to become more fulfilling with each passing year.

Still, as I looked at the flashing sign announcing "Live Nude" women, in my heart was unfulfilled longing. I knew I had to reach the women inside that club.

I glanced in my car a small stack of postcards with a simple yet powerful message: "Her value is far above rubies and pearls."

That was exactly what I wanted to communicate to the women at the club. I quickly jotted down notes on each postcard and placed them on the dancers' cars. I imagined them reading them in the quiet of their cars at night's end and hoped that, for a moment, they would be encouraged there was a greater life for them, and that love and hope still existed.

That night, through that small gesture was formed Treasures Out of Darkness (www.iamatreasure.com), an outreach and support group for women in the sex industry. It seemed all of my past pain had purpose.

In some ways, I felt as though my life had come full circle.

As I spent my nights and weekends building Treasures, I continued to work as a social worker for DCFS—in the very system, the very county, where I was once a client.

At one point, I even worked in the same office where my social worker had been assigned.

Perhaps even more mind-blowing

was the day when—during an interdisciplinary team meeting—I had the honor and pleasure of crossing paths with the inspiring psychologist I saw when a teenager—working with the same client as I. She had been such an inspiration to me. This was beautiful and surreal.

The intersection between the population served through Treasures and the clients served at DCFS is staggering.

During my graduate education I conducted a literature review of studies related to women in the sex industry. Overwhelming research indicates that large proportions of these women have been sexually and physically abused as children. Studies further revealed they are faced with higher rates of drug addictions and mental health problems such as depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder than the general population.

Throughout the next couple of years, Treasures grew in both numbers of volunteers and number of women reached. Finally, in January of 2007, I was able to make a full-time job out of my heart's passion—a constant reminder of the vast opportunities in social work.

Treasures is now a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization with more than 50 incredible volunteers. Since conception, we have regularly visited more than 150 strip clubs employing thousands of women. We give each woman gift bags filled with cosmetics and jewelry with the simple intention to let them know that they are loved and valuable, and that we encourage and support them as they flourish and become everything they were created to be.

Each visit, I think of Alexis.

I wonder if, like me, she came to discover her preciousness and that her life is meaningful. I can only hope she is not trapped by despair behind the walls of a club we visit. And if by chance she is, perhaps one of my gifts has reached her. ❖

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 **The National Association of Social Workers – California Chapter**

2007 NASW-CA Annual Conference
**Envisioning the Future:
 Working for Change**

Friday and Saturday, May 4 & 5, 2007
 San Francisco Airport Marriott, Burlingame

Reasons to Attend
 Continuing Education and Professional Development
 Exhibitors, Networking, Receptions, and Prizes
 Awards Lunch Program and Special Interest Groups

Targeted Audiences
 Pre-Licensure Classes for ASWs/IMFs
 Mandated Licensure Classes for LCSWs/MFTs
 15-Hr Clinical Supervision Class

For Conference Brochure:
Visit the chapter's website at www.naswca.org

CEUs Approved by BBS and Accepted in 34 States

**Save the Date
 Call for Papers**

The New California Association of
 School Social Workers Statewide Conference

Creating HOPE:
 Strengthening our Children,
 Families, and Schools

October 11 - 13, 2007
 The Queen Mary
 Long Beach, CA

Pre-Conference Advanced Training
 on "Cutting and Self Injury"
 Presented by Andrew Levander
 October 11, 2007

Keynote Address by
 Dr. Marleen Wong, Director
 National Child Traumatic
 Stress Network/SAMHSA

Call for Papers:
 Please send workshop title,
 abstract (100 words or less) &
 presenter contact information by
 April 20, 2007 to

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