Social Justice: From Rhetoric to Action

Catherine Vernon

Barry University

 Don’t talk about it, be about it. This is the statement that comes to mind when I reflect on this topic. Social workers devote their lives to being about it. There are many individuals in our world who think their eloquence will gain them the vote, who use empty words with no backing. Social Work is one of the many fields where we put our words into practice. Where policy shapes practice and practice shapes policy. The words we speak, the visions we share, along with the needs of the clients we serve, are what develop the theories we utilize. These theories are then implemented in the work we do and are evaluated for efficacy and efficiency, while being mindful of the ethics we uphold. Social Work is one of few professions where ethics are of the highest regard.

This is my first year returning to school after having been in the field for four years now. I have seen the work I have done invaluable to my growth on both a personal and professional level. I have learned to develop my own voice and teach others to do the same. I think a major factor in putting change into action comes down to listening to the needs of those you serve. Social works stand by the motto to listen more than we speak. People need to be heard, they need to know that someone truly cares for them and that there is hope for them.

Social workers look at an individual as a puzzle, made of many pieces, trying to make sense of their shape and where they come together, to make up the entire portrait of what is their client. We work to deconstruct someone at their core. We acknowledge what makes someone tick; where their passions reside. We work to decipher what makes them who they are and why they do the things they do. We then take those pieces that are beautiful, some that are unique, and the ones that are hard to fit together and place them before our client. We let them know what are their strengths, their unique abilities, along with those things they can build upon to make that puzzle whole again. These basic principles influence the way we work amongst individuals, clients, and groups.

We cannot look at the micro without first understanding the macro. We look at the environment in which one resides and the factors that have shaped these puzzle pieces. We look at the gaps in why the pieces don’t come together so easily. We work towards filling those voids, or reshaping resources that are already there, so that not only our clients, but everyone, is given the choice for a better outcome. When we look at not just the client, but the client’s world as a whole, they start to see the world again. They are given a sense of hope that they can truly take charge of their own lives and the people in it. One success leads into many, as they begin using their voice and taking ownership over their lives. Misfortunes, and the inability to access resources, now result in self-determination and sufficiency. The end result, social justice at its finest.

In the work I do, I am devoted to these agendas on a daily basis. Instead of taking someone by the hand, I work to leave a lasting impression on the heart. This is what it means to put rhetoric into action and Social Workers do it every day.