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Joining the Journey

Social worker Elise Brokaw '81 helps families get back on track

By Sarah Zobel

In the kitchen of a small house in rural Vermont, Elise Brokaw '81 is making chili, taking turns stirring the pot with her co-chefs: two children and a woman. Together, they chose the recipe and shopped at the local grocery store for the necessary ingredients, and now the chili simmers quietly as they move about the kitchen, setting the table, slicing bread, pouring milk, and telling each other stories about the day's events. When they sit down to eat, everyone takes a moment to state one thing he or she appreciates about every other person at the table.

But it's not Brokaw's family—it's not even her kitchen. That belongs to the other woman, a single mother; she and the two children, her sons, ages 11 and 13, are on the roster of clients Brokaw, a licensed clinical social worker, is treating. They survived a traumatic situation, and are now learning how to live together again as a family, something they hadn't done since before the older son entered a residential program.

"It still amazes me," says Brokaw, "the capacity to which people let you into their lives."

Indeed, the bulk of Brokaw's work consists of in-home visits; the advantage is that there she is the visitor, in contrast to her office, where it can feel "sterile and compartmentalized." In the house, "I like to fit in like a piece of furniture," she says. She doesn't normally eat with her clients, but in this case she thought it would be the best way to fully interact with mother and sons. Over the course of some eight months, she spent eight to ten hours a week with the family providing trauma work, parenting and life skills.

"The reality is, you walk into a home, and no one needs to say a thing," she explains. "You can just look around and begin to understand some of the family norms. My job is to assess a family that has requested support and family counseling. I need to respect their family values and culture while understanding ways to support them in making the necessary changes to strengthen their ability to live happily. But I also need to create that didactic to help them realize how they can figure things out in a different way." In this case, the individualized approach worked; eventually, Brokaw and the mother mutually agreed to reduce the frequency of her visits.

“I like to think that I’m working myself out of a job,” Brokaw says. Although she often works with clients for years, she always pauses every six months to reassess a family’s strengths and update treatment plans.

Brokaw grew up with four brothers in Greenwich, Connecticut; her family reinforced her lifelong desires to work with people and give back. “My parents led by example by always having an open door policy to our home for those who needed a break and to spend time with a loving family.” At Taft, Brokaw observed that many of her peers were there “because home was not the right place for them to be, for whatever reason.” Recognizing that many of those students came from solid socioeconomic backgrounds, Brokaw shrugs. “All families struggle,” she says.

Post-graduation, she enrolled at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire, but headed to Maryland’s Eastern Shore after just three semesters. A job at the Echo Hill Outdoor School allowed her to teach fifth and sixth graders about “who they are in relation to the environment.” One gap year turned into another, and five years later, Brokaw realized that although she didn’t want to be a classroom teacher, she did want to work with kids in a supportive capacity. She transferred to the University of Vermont, where she earned a bachelor’s in social work, and

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then found a job as a social worker for the State of Vermont. She spent a couple of years working with homeless families through the Department of Social Welfare before deciding that although she genuinely wanted to understand social policies that dictate the laws for many state programs, she’d had enough of government bureaucracy.

“As a social worker you look at the variation by which individuals live and say, this family works hard and has never had the opportunity to earn a livable wage. I wish we would support the economics needed to support all working families,” she says.

So she moved on, landing at Spectrum Youth & Family Services, a Burlington, Vermont-based nonprofit whose mission is to empower teenagers, young adults and people with a history of violence and their families to make and sustain positive changes through prevention, intervention and life skills services. The organizational culture and belief that people can change their lives was a natural fit for Brokaw, who worked at Spectrum for 18 years. Although Vermont is viewed for its rural beauty and small town charm, there are growing concerns state-wide about violence, drugs and poverty.

During that time, Brokaw returned to UVM for her master’s in social work. Her graduate internship was in Middlebury at the Counseling Service of Addison County (CSAC), but when her degree was complete Brokaw returned to Spectrum, where she directed their foster care program, and eventually moved her way up to directing their residential programs. That included a

short-term emergency shelter for homeless and runaway youth; a group residence for adolescent boys in the custody of the Department of Children and Families; a transitional living program; and Spectrum's foster care program, which meant paying biweekly visits to the 19 licensed homes scattered around northern Vermont.

"The variety of experiences I had at Spectrum really helped me grow professionally," she says. "When you decide to have longevity in an organization, there's the art of changing jobs and finding other things to do as the years tick by. I was really fortunate to get to move around and be exposed to all those experiences."

But at the same time, Brokaw was considering her own future. She'd been living almost an hour south of Burlington, where she and her partner, Nancy Yannett, built a house that's completely off the grid, with solar panels juicing 16 batteries in their basement. They'd settled in Lincoln, a quintessential Vermont village on the edge of the Green Mountains that, like a lot of small towns, is home to a general store, the kind of place where locals go as much to load up on gossip as to replenish their bread and milk supplies. When it went on the market in 2009, right about the time that Brokaw was thinking of leaving Spectrum after 18 years, she toyed with buying the store.

"Don't we all have our 'dream a little dream'?" she says, laughing. "I could bag groceries and have control over all the little things." It didn't happen, which Brokaw calls a blessing in disguise, but she did spend nine months working the cash register there while considering her next professional move: "It was great: I did a little social work behind the counter and then I could just say, 'That'll be \$8.72, and move it along.'"

In the end, Brokaw returned to CSAC; today, her work in family outreach includes a gamut of clinical services providing treatment and support for anxiety, depression, behavioral issues and trauma. Her clients are families with children ages five and up, and Brokaw, who has no children of her own, says that over the last 25 years she has developed incredible respect for parents and their kids who have shown the courage to make profound changes in their lives.

"For adolescents and younger kids," she says, "when families can't step up, you find yourself being so many different things to them because that's what they need—to get back on track or even to find a track." Her colleagues joked that she might end up taking one of her 15-year-olds home. He's not an abstraction: he's a client, a boy with an IQ of 62 who has been diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, depression and autism. Brokaw has gotten to know and understand him through traditional therapeutic approaches but also by incorporating special activities that include time outdoors, where he's most comfortable. The boy has recently been enrolled in an out-of-state program, but Brokaw is there to help him make the transition, communicating with him twice a week via Skype. And when she says that it's "an utter gift to be accepted by him with his unique strengths and challenges and that he felt safe and trusting enough to let me join him in his journey," there's not the slightest hint of sanctimony.

"You always hold a place in your heart for the folks that you're working with," Brokaw says. "There's empathy for how hard life really is, if for no other reason than that's where you landed on planet Earth. Some of us get placed at the starting line and others of us get placed pretty far back." ■

Sarah Zobel writes profiles and features about health and education for a variety of publications and websites. Visit sarahzobel.com.