

Autobiographical Sketch of Jessica Williamson

Paix. French for peace. That is my middle name. Being the second of seven children, peacemaker quickly became my role. I mediated fights, advocated for the underdog, helped with homework and loved my family members. Yet, peace is not just something carried in my name and my character--it is central to my family's culture. Because of my family's diverse culture--both maternal and paternal grandparents from Mexico, a mother who was raised on a Navajo reservation in Arizona, and memories of attending Navajo PowWows when young--principles of peace, service, and community have been living principles for me ever since I was young.

My parents advocated my receiving the best education possible. This meant transferring schools every year until high school and experimenting with public, charter, and home schooling. I had to learn balance and multi-tasking skills in order to quickly teach myself the material I had missed as I moved from one school district to another while continuing my musical ambitions with the piano, flute, and voice and athletic aspirations in both cross country and swimming. At each new school I developed new friendships and continued to serve where I was. In 2004, Mayor Berman recognized me for the variety of services that I provided over the years when I was awarded the Town of Gilbert Mayor's Volunteer of the Year award.

While life kept me busy and I found great pleasure in serving others, in high school I began to struggle with depression and anorexia. Not knowing what to do, or who to turn to, I sought to self-medicate through long walks and a lot of crying. It was not until arriving at Brigham Young University (BYU) that I became aware of where I could turn for help. After personally experiencing effective counseling, group therapy, and endless patience and support from loved ones, I have experienced the healing and change that can come with assistance. Once

overcoming pain and loneliness, my desire to serve others and bring peace and aid to their lives only increased.

While attending BYU I volunteered as a peer mentor to freshman students, organized charity drives and service opportunities for others, was a committee leader and member of multiple campus activities, and worked as part of the elementary Learn to Read Program. As a resident of the City of Provo, I sought to serve through my involvement with the American Red Cross, by being an active committee member of the BYU Food and Care Coalition, organizing charity drives and Christmases for those who would be without, and as an event facilitator at Utah's State Hospital in Provo. Each of these experiences provided me new understanding of other's circumstances and a variety of ways that service and peace can be provided to each.

Beyond my service, I have always enjoyed teaching and working with others. My jobs facilitated this love as I worked as a lifeguard and swim instructor since I was eighteen and as a summer camp counselor for the deaf and hearing. When seeking a major to study, I sought one that would fit with my love for service, education, peace and community...I selected Social Work.

With each class, and finally two very different internships, I found that social work was infused with many of the values and aims that I hold dear. My first internship was with Aspiro, a therapeutic wilderness adventure program. Though at the onset I was unsure of my ability to provide therapy to at-risk youth in the wilderness while worrying about my own survival, I went forward to experience and try new things. Reflecting on the countless experiences I had while in the field, I feel that I learned just as much as the youth that I worked with. Being able to assist with crisis interventions and apply techniques such as solution focus therapy, positive psychology, self efficacy, self-determination and character development theories through

creative activities such as rock climbing, rappelling, mountain biking and backpacking, I witnessed the power of change in other's lives.

Following Aspiro, I began working at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center on the Mother/Baby and Pediatric floors. Very different from the wilderness, in the hospital I performed crisis interventions and worked with individuals, families and community on the micro, mezzo and macro levels. I assisted families with finding resources. I created a resource list of programs offering free and discounted clothing, diapers, activities, and more to those with twins, triplets, etc. Working as a researcher of programs and policies, a teacher, an advocate, and a listener at the hospital, my commitment to working in the field of social work only increased.

Research has always been an interest to me. When I first attended BYU, I had declared my major as a clinical laboratory science major with the desire to do medical research.. Within the social work field I have been able to continue with my passion for research as I studied different methodologies, gender issues, views on sexual orientation and effective programs that would help those in my communities. Even with the ending of my internships, I am continuing to research and work with other professionals in the field - Dr. Gordon Day and Dr. Mark Widmer. The three of us have shared interests in programs like Aspiro, and I am currently researching how group work in wilderness therapy programs will be effective when modified to meet the learning differences of at-risk youth with learning disabilities.

As I continue to work in the social work field, I seek to carry forward with my happy, hard-working attitude to serve, bring peace and educate both individuals and communities. I love the opportunity that I have to interact with and help others regardless of their circumstances. Currently working as a clinical assistant for Aspiro, I have these opportunities and am beginning to develop my own voice in the professional field.