

## Robert Niezwaag Jr.: A Social Worker's Story

My story of how I became a social worker started long before I had the slightest idea of ever enrolling in the BSW and subsequent MSW program at the University of Wyoming. In 1990-91 I was a senior in high school and was having a difficult time deciding what I wanted to do after graduation. One thing that I knew for sure was I did not want to attend college. I wanted to have an exciting and well-paying career. At this time the United States military was involved in Operation Desert Shield/Operation Desert Storm and I remember thinking, "I should join the military and serve my country, it's a great career that is full of adventure." I made up my mind to enlist in the Army and had a career that lasted almost 15 years. The Army provided me with experiences that I never would have had without serving. I was deployed into combat during Operation Iraqi Freedom where my career was cut short about five years short of retirement.

After being discharged from the Army I moved back to Wyoming where I felt lost. I no longer had my career and I began dealing with dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I kept denying the symptoms that I was having because the military had taught me an unwritten code that I was not supposed to display weakness. When I got out of the military soldiers were being encouraged to seek mental health counseling for combat related experiences, but many didn't because of the negative stigmas associated with PTSD. Finally one day my father suggested that I talk with someone about the problems that I was having. Following his suggestion I went to the Department of Veterans Affairs to speak to my doctor, who referred me to a social worker. When he did this I thought to myself, "why do I need to see a social worker, all they do is take children from people's homes." I reluctantly followed my doctors' advice and saw several social workers over the next couple years. I talked with other veterans about their experiences with social workers and they would often say "talking with social workers is difficult because many of them don't know much about the military, let alone combat, so how can he or she help me?" I then decided that I wanted to be a therapist, just like some of the great social workers that I had met during treatment.

I found many similarities between being a social worker and serving in the military. People often think that serving in the military is about combat, when it is actually more about selfless service, mentoring others, and being a role model. After some thought, I decided to become a social worker and hopefully work for the Department of Veterans Affairs because I could help and relate to them as a veteran myself. I resigned from my job and began my five year educational career at Central Wyoming College and then moved on to the social work program at the University of Wyoming.

### What was your experience at the University of Wyoming like?

I learned much more about social work in my time at the University of Wyoming than I could have ever imagined. The leadership, faculty, and staff of the social work program were amazing. The environment there was similar to that of a close family. The faculty really took the time to make sure that the tools and skills needed to become a generalist social worker were taught. My experience with the social work program was similar to the comradery I experienced in the military, not only with the faculty and staff, but with my fellow students. I found it beneficial that I was able to tailor my experiences and education to learning more about the mental health field and diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders through my education and my internship at Cheyenne Regional Medical Center's Inpatient Psychiatric Unit. It helped me gain experience toward my ultimate goal of becoming a mental health therapist.

### What opportunities have you had since graduation?

I have had a few job opportunities since graduating from the University of Wyoming with my MSW. I currently work for the Wyoming Department of Corrections, Addicted Offender Accountability Act program. In my job I conduct comprehensive substance abuse assessments for individuals convicted of felony crimes, who are awaiting sentencing, and I provide substance abuse and mental health treatment recommendations to the District Court Judges.

### Why should other people think about becoming a social worker?

If you have a desire to help people overcome a wide array of life's challenges, this is the field for you. Compared to other helping professions, a social work degree is very versatile and can qualify you to provide services in a wide range of professions. These professions span anywhere from being a therapist all the way to changing community problems as a policy advocate. If you are interested in becoming a social worker, the University of Wyoming is a college that you should seriously consider if you want a quality and individualized college experience.



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