

Jesutofe Salau: Hello to all of our listeners. My name is Tofe, and today is another great day to be a social worker. Welcome to social work, amplified a podcast, hosted by speak, speak stands for social policy, education, advocacy, and knowledge. And our mission is to amplify the voices of social workers by providing resources, increasing students, political engagement, and facilitating networking offer speak would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Simmons sister fund at Texas women's foundation. I would like to introduce our guest for today's podcast.

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[00:01:00] Kristina wi O'Brien Kristina wi O'Brien is the partnership director at VO. ER, she, you received her BSW from Providence college and her MSW from Boston university during the first part of her career. She specialized in adoption preparation, placement and support in both the public and nonprofit sectors. She then engaged in training outreach and legislative advocacy as a director for the Massachusetts chapter of the national association of social workers.

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Jesutofe Salau: Most recently, Kristina worked at the Boston university's school of social work as an assistant director of online advising and field education, where she developed partnership across the country for MSW field placements and grew the program from 30 students to over hundred. She has taught many professional education programs as well as policy and ethics graduate courses. In addition to her social work career, she was named as an unsung heroin by the Massachusetts legislator and was then appointed to the pie Mo county commission on the status of women as a NAGO member in July of 2018, she has been a vice chair and secretary on this commission, which promotes programs and policy to advance women and girls in the community. Her official term recently ended. And she was voted in as the EITA commissioner. Welcome Kristina, what an intense biography you have. You've done a lot.

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Thank you so much Tofe. I'm really excited to be here, uh, with you today and to have a conversation and yeah, I've been a social worker for over 30 years and it's been an amazing journey.

Jesutofe Salau: Wow. 30 years, three decades.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: I know I'm old, I'm old.

Jesutofe Salau: I'm like, that's good though. You've done so much like your, um, biography itself was just like, and then you've worked in a lot of macro macro fields, which I really am really impressed with. So I'm just so excited to interview today and I'm going to go into the first question and this is a question that, um, I'm re I'm excited to hear because not only are you a master social worker, you've been a master's social worker for a few decades now. So what led you to obtain a master's in social worker?

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Yeah, so, so really I think in order to, to be a, a, a social worker and to, to have a, a strong career, you need a master's degree. Um, in high school and college, I

[00:03:30] volunteered with organizations, uh, that provided services for children and families, uh, domestic violence, shelters, and school programs. And I was really drawn to issues and causes with a social justice focus. When I was in college, I took a sociology course and loved studying about human and social relationships and institutions. Um, I did not want to be a sociologist or teach sociology cuz I really

[00:04:00] wanted to work with individuals, families, and communities. Um, and I was an undeclared major in college and uh, had a conversation with the chair of the social work department at Providence college and learned about the hands on experience through internships and ability to really gain that work experience while you were in college.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Um, so I declared social work as my major and uh, enjoyed, uh, being able to be exposed to the field of child welfare through those internships. Um, and in order to really sharpen my, my clinical skills and my policy skills, I decided to pursue my MSW and I wanted to different experience in a small liberal arts college. And I wanted a university that was a big school and really located in an urban area with an urban mission. And that's what Boston university offered at the time. Um, and I, that was the only school that I applied to and thankfully I was accepted. And then

[00:05:00] from there, you know, that really launched my career, um, in social work.

Jesutofe Salau: Awesome. So you, like, you always kind of knew this is kind of what you wanted to do and like you said, W's kind of like a key in elevating our careers as a social worker. So, um, as I read in your biography, you were originally started off in like adoption and placement mainly like kind of like, um, sector. So what kind of made you transition into, um, political social work and advocacy and now like what made you concentrate in that, in that field?

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Yeah, lean I was, I am really lucky in that I knew at a very young age what I wanted to do. Um, and I li I literally like when I was 20 years old, had that kind of aha moment about being a social worker and the career hasn't let me down, uh, at all. But, um, you know, my, my trajectory, I, I started off, uh, you know, with, with a, with a clinical focus in my master program because my first job after undergrad

[00:06:00] was at an adoption exchange in Rhode Island, I was hired as a recruitment coordinator and it was actually, I was engaged in a lot of macro type experiences of planning events, working on coalitions, working with other organizations, doing advocacy work and, you know, really helping children in foster care find permanent families. And while I was in that position, I realized that if my long term goal was to work on a policy or macro or advocacy level, I really wanted to

[00:06:30] understand the lived experiences of kids and families who were involved in the child welfare system from that clinical one on one perspective, um, having that person to person community experience, I really felt would enhance my skills and knowledge for a future role as maybe the commissioner of a state child welfare system.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: So after receiving my MSW and years of clinical work, you kind of get promoted and you get, people are like, oh, you're a really good, you should be a supervisor, oh, you're a really good supervisor. You should be a manager. And I kind of moved

[00:07:00] my way up the food chain from there. And, and, and because also, you know, when you're doing clinical work, the work that you're able to do is, is governed by the policies that we create and, and the systems that we work in. So, you know, it became, you know, again, important for me to understand the nuances of that individual lived experience to then bring that to program development systems, change, legislative advocacy, all of those types of things. Um, and then, you know, as my career moved on, I ended up going into work at the national association of social workers, the Massachusetts chapter.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: And that was a whole eye-opening experience because I was really able to, you know, go to the state house and meet with our elected leaders, um, and share my experiences as a social worker and someone who's been, you know, engaged in work with individuals and families in communities. Um, and for me having that seat at the table to advocate for changes, laws and develop policies, um, was exhilarating and really allowed me to see how as social workers, we have that unique perspective, that's grounded in values of social and racial justice and that we really should be the highest levels of decision making.

Jesutofe Salau: That's very true. So basically kind of like in your career, you were promoted and you kind of like transitioned into that macro sector. And, you know, this has been like a reoccurring theme in our podcast on how, like, you know, as a macro social worker, we need that micro experience. We need that micro exposure and it all kind of like connects us to, you know, the bigger picture of things. So right now you're like, you're the director of partnerships at Vote-ER, not sure if I'm saying that correctly,

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: You are.

[00:09:00] Jesutofe Salau: I am. Okay. Okay. So you're the director of partnerships right now. So can you tell us a little bit about Vote-ER? What is the organization all about?

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Yeah, so I'm really excited to be at Vote-ER. I came to Vote-ER, uh full-time in July and actually started off as, um, a volunteer and, uh, Vote-ER is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization with the goal, uh, to provide patients the opportunity to register to vote because most of our healthcare system and our healthcare experiences are determined by the policies that are elected officials implement and you know, is something that social workers really understand our approach is to using a person and environment lens. And, um, you know, we understand how individuals and communities, uh, are impacted by, uh, the systems and governments and laws. And so, um, it was really thrilling for me to find out about the work of Vote-ER and, and to come and, and work. So we, our, our goals are to, you know, expand the electorate as well as to change the culture of healthcare.

[00:10:00] Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: And we have a host of volunteers. We have state organizers where we are, um, when we have tools that can allow providers, doctors, nurses, and social workers to bring, uh, these tools to the work with patients and clients and incorporate

[00:10:30] questions into an intake or an assessment, um, or, or a discharge of, you know, are you registered to vote? Do you have a safe for the upcoming election? Um, and, and, you know, we're on that broader level, we're really trying to, uh, move forward. The idea that professionals and social workers are healthcare professionals, um, as well as working in all different types of, of aspects of social work. Um, but that we have a role in improve the health of our communities through this type of civic engagement and, and bringing health equity. Uh, I think to our communities through voter registration,

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Jesutofe Salau: That's really good. Like this is my first time actually hearing about Vot-ER, and I believe that ER stands for something special. And I'm going to ask you about that. But, um, something that you said really, um, really resonated with me, how getting people to vote, um, improves our healthcare system and we don't realize how much voting can improve even like improves our healthcare system. Cause that that's why it's really important to get those people, those patients that may not realize that, Hey, actually, some of the things you're experiencing right now, can you can, you can help change that. So what does ER stand for at the end of Vot-ER?

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: You know, to, that's a really good question. I didn't, I didn't, I, I think it, we, it stands for emergency room. Um, so, um, so our founder is Dr. Alistair Martin and he is an emergency room physician at the Massachusetts General Hospital. He's actually now at the White House as a White House fellow, uh, working with the vice president on advancing voting rights. And I know given the, the current moment that we're in, um, trying to expand voting rights, voting rights and the bills that are before Congress, um, he's very busy with that, but, um, you know, what Dr. Martin was seeing in the emergency room were patients who were coming in not only because they may have, um, you know, had an accident or, you know, have an urgent medical situation, but also because of the side effects of the social determinants of health, um, they needed a place to stay because they were unhoused, they were hungry and they needed a meal.

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Um, he talks, uh, very eloquently about one experience he had with a mom who came to the emergency room with her young children on a very cold Boston, winter evening. And she, uh, didn't have a place to stay. And so what did he do? He called the social worker and he said, you know, what, what, what should I do with this mom and her children? And it's kind of a very long story, but the short version of it is that, um, in order to get her into housing, she actually needed to establish Massachusetts residency, which doesn't seem to really make sense if you're unhoused and in need of shelter. Um, but the social worker said, well, one way you could do that is by asking her if she's registered to vote. So he did that. And she said, no, one's ever asked me that before.

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: And he was really surprised by that answer. And it was because of that experience because of the inspiration from a social worker that he decided, you know, I think there's more that we need to do to support our patients, their individual health, as well as their, the community, the health of the community address those upstream

[00:14:00] issues of social determinants of health by policy change. And what's the best way to do that is through the power of voting. Um, and so that's one of the reasons why I'm so thrilled to be here is just because of the way that social workers kind of inspired the, the birth of this is, um, and that we really have a seat at the table with doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals to, to make those improvements.

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Jesutofe Salau: That's really awesome because I actually have heard about how like emergency rooms or mental health sensors, they become like a place where homeless people, they just go, they go to, to check in for the night and then they're gone the next morning just because they need a place to sleep. So that vision that he had was really an awesome vision. And I'm glad it's coming to pass right now. So for upcoming social work students that might be interested in a position like yours. Can you provide a brief insight into what you do overall or what a date for you looks like?

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Yeah, so I have a lot of meetings. Um, and, um, one of the things I would love to really talk about for social work students is that there are opportunities for students to get involved. Now, um, we are in the midst of planning, a social work, healthy democracy campaign for the month of March. So a lot of my time and energy is spent on, on helping to plan and execute that event. So what we're going to be doing is having schools across the country, social work schools, uh, have students, uh, engaged in a very friendly, a petition of bringing voter registration to their field internships or their campuses and seeing how many patients they can or clients they can register to vote. So we work with schools of social work with hospitals, with institutions, I've got, uh, two other big projects of institutionalizing voter registration into the, of services that an org, a healthcare institution may, uh, provide.

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Uh, one hospital is doing it in their, um, registration process. So their registrars, when their pre patient is in the emergency room will come in and ask a patient, you know, can we check your, your address? Can we check your, um, your insurance and, oh, by the way, uh, would you like to check your voter registration status or do you want to register to vote? And we have these, uh, badges and QR codes that someone can scan with their smartphone. And they're brought to a landing page where they can fill out information and also not only register to vote, but request a vote by mail, uh, ballot. If your state allows that, um, another hospital that we're working with actually in Boston or healthcare institution, they are actually using social workers in some of their departments to roll out, uh, photo registration. And these are going to be social workers who have long standing relationships with patients.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: And so that either in an intake with a new patient or in an already well developed relationship, we'll be bringing into the conversation, uh, questions around, you

[00:17:00] know, are you registered to vote? Do you want to register to vote? We offer the tools through these lanyards and, um, badge backers, and we also offer scripts and training. So part of what my role is as well is, uh, helping to write up some of those scripts, giving feedback, and do training for schools of social work who want to engage in our healthy democracy campaign, as well as these other institutions who are getting their employees to do this work.

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Jesutofe Salau: Cool. So do you work with, um, patients at all or is it more so macro just, you know, the meetings and just trying to get other organizations to engage with you, your organization?

Kristina Whitten-O'Brien: Yeah, so, so I don't necessarily work with patients directly. Um, what we do is, um, work mostly with providers, so that being students, uh, you know, healthcare

providers, so who are social workers, doctors, nurses, and administrators as well about determining whether or not this is something they want to bring into their, their institution. So, um, we have had conversations recently though about bringing patient voice into, um, into our, uh, group of folks that we work with and having patient voice at the table. Um, you know, we're all consumers of the

[00:18:00] healthcare system. Hopefully we all go to the doctors and take care of our own wellbeing. Um, but I also think that there are certain populations of patients too, that we need to have at the table. And, you know, as, so we understand that [00:18:30] having a diversity or a diverse group of voices at the table and including patient and client voice is very important.

Jesutofe Salau: That is virtue. Our voices are very important as patients. So, um, that's what you do as the director of partnerships, but since you were a social worker for 30 years, you have, I've done quite a bit of other stuff. And I wanted to ask you about, um, just one other thing that you did. So what did you do when you were appointed as [00:19:00] a vice chair and secretary of the pout? Oh, Plymouth council

Kristina Whitten-O'Brien: Convention,

Jesutofe Salau: The status of women.

Kristina Whitten-O'Brien: Yeah. So, um, so that was a real honor, um, um, you know, to be involved in my community and, you know, one of the things that happens is as, as you kind of move up the food chain and you're getting more into these macro levels of work, sometimes, you know, having that connection, you know, on the ground to organizations and what's happening, um, you know, you don't always have that [00:19:30] year to the ground. And so this is an opportunity where I was able to, um, there there's a statewide commission, um, and they instituted these chapters. So it was an appointment for the Plymouth county, which is composed of, um, I think 26 communities, uh, 26 towns in one city actually. Um, and our role, there were nine of us on the commission, uh, was to advance, uh, issues of concern for women and [00:20:00] girls in Plymouth county and to develop resources.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: So we did things like hold community hearings, uh, at our local library. Uh, we did some, uh, advertising of that, uh, with our local media channels as well. Another thing that we did, we created a resource book for women and children that could be housed the local library, and it was resources of everything for education to, you know, transitional housing, domestic violence, all those kinds of things. Uh, and then we also had a very strong connection to our local legislative delegation. And we were instituting yearly meetings with our local state representatives and senators. Uh, and we would bring women from the community to talk about some of the issues and concerns that they were experiencing. We had a very strong relationship with the statewide commission and when with COVID, we were able to work collaboratively with the statewide commission on doing a survey of what the needs were for women and girls.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: And then we actually presented the results of that survey to our local, uh, legislative delegation, which I think was really important for them to hear about what women and girls particularly were struggling with during the time of the pandemic. And that unfortunately is still continuing, um, given how this pandemic is, is continuing on. Um, and then, you know, we also put together I was the chair of the legislative subcommittee. So we put together a list of bills that we wanted to support that were, that would directly impact women and girls. Um, one bill was really interesting. It was to, um, add, uh, childcare expenses as something that would be, be covered for anybody who was running for public office. And this is something that women would mostly encounter because, you know, women who are running and women are considered primary caretakers, you know, they'd have to pay for babysitters and childcare. Um, so if you can use campaign funds to pay for your dry cleaning, why can't you use them to pay for your babysitter to take care of your children when you have to go to an event or a meeting? Um, so those were just some of the examples of things that we did, uh, as part of the commission.

Jesutofe Salau: That's awesome. So it seems like you did a lot of organization and outreach as part of that commission. And how long was your term during that commission?

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Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Yeah, so, um, I did three years, um, and I really felt like, um, you know, I, that it was, it was important for me to kind of do my time and make space for someone else to come on board. Um, and because I was really the first commissioner, um, appointed and to complete a full term, they decided to, um, have me stay on in an emerita role so that I will always have connection. I won't be able to vote on anything, but I will still be involved, uh, and still be able to attend meetings and support in any way that I can, uh, in perpetuity. So that's very nice and an honor.

Jesutofe Salau: Okay. That's what that means. That Vet-ER role. So since you've been a social worker for 30 years, what is one of the most significant highlight moments during your career in social work?

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: You know, it's, that's a tough question. There were a lot of tough questions that you sent my way to. Um, so, so, you know, there are so many moments. I mean, I think there are individual moments that I can think about what in, um, in, with young kids and families. Um, I remember we had a little boy that we worked with, uh, who was being adopted by his family. And, um, it was, it was grandparents that were adopting him and he had been through a very difficult time. He had tragically lost his mother, um, and had a couple of adoption disruptions. And, um, there was, there was a, a moment when the social worker, we were talking with him about his coming upcoming adoption. And we said, you know, you, your, your name's going to change too. And, um, he wanted to change his name to John Deere because his grandfather that was adopting him, had John Deere trucks on the property.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: And he just felt like that was one way that he could really be claimed by this family was to change his name to John Deere. So that's something that overall these years I remember, um, and that's a real highlight to know that this young person was able to find stability and permanency after some really challenging and tragic events in his life. Um, you know, another time too was, um, kind of more on that macro level. Um, when I was able to testify before the matches Massachusetts state legislature, we were looking to change our licensing laws in Massachusetts, and I was chairing the subcommittee for SW behind that, um, and got to do some writing of that bill and advocacy and, um, you know, sitting before the legislature and telling my story was a real honor, something that will stand out in my mind,

Jesutofe Salau: Those are really great stories. And I can imagine I'm pretty sure it was hard, um, to, to some of the most significant moments after all, you know, being a social for, for 30 years. I'm pretty sure you've had a lot of highs and a lot of, you know, good stories and good testimonies, but now we're going to go ahead and move into our political advocacy questions and ask social workers, like according to our code of ethics, we, that, so we have to fight for social justice and we need to remain, you know, advocates and like, especially vote and things like that. So for you, I'm just going to like, try to learn about your personal experiences. So before becoming a social worker, were you always politically engaged?

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Yeah, so, um, so considering I became a social worker at 21, you know, I had only been able to vote for a few years. Um, but you know, my family was always really active. Um, I remember going to the polls with my mom and dad when they would vote. And those were back in the day when you would go behind a curtain and click the buttons. And I always thought it was really cool to go that curtain. Um, my dad actually, um, had a, my dad, um, both my mom and dad were teachers. And, um, my dad had a friend who ran for Boston school committee. And, um, I remember, I think I was like 13 years old and helped out on that campaign and was actually, um, posed for some pictures with the candidate, for his, his, his literature that he would drop. Um, and I thought that was kind of fun.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Um, and actually truth be told, uh, in full disclosure I am married to an elected official. So, um, so politics is, is in my, is in my, uh, blood and I eat sleep and

[00:27:00] breathe, uh, politics personally and professionally. So, um, you know, I'm very fortunate that I had a family experience that, uh, had the privilege to be able to vote, to not experience any oppression and with, with that, um, and that really brought myself and my brother, uh, along and showed us how important it was. And I think, you know, that's one of the things that I'm really glad to be able to do now is to bring that, uh, same kind of idea and energy to students. Um, as well as others

Jesutofe Salau: That's, like you said, it's really fortunate that you had that background and your family was like always involved in voting and things like that because, you know, some people or some social work students, they don't have that background, but just because we don't have that when we do become social workers, even as students, we have to, you know, take on that responsibility to be politically engaged in and go in advocate and all that stuff. So there are many ways to be politically engaged. What are some of the ways that you choose to remain
[00:28:00] politically engaged after all, like you said, it's embedded in who you are, but can you give us a little bit of, you know, practical things that you do?

Kristina Whitten-O'Brien: Yeah. So, um, so again, you know, because we are a political family, um, I can't escape it in some ways. Um, so we, you know, we, we are heavily engaged in attending functions and events and fundraisers, um, you know, being able to, and, and it's, and it's, it's a true privilege, um, to be able to do that. And I would really want to acknowledge that, um, that, that aspect of, of, of power that I am able to take advantage of. Um, but I do think that, you know, it's as simple as making sure myself and my family members vote in every election, because a lot of what we're seeing right now are policies being decided like wearing masks in school for children, um, whether or not businesses would require a vaccination or proof of vaccination, those decisions are being made on very micro levels of boards of health and school committees, and local elections often have the lowest percentage of turnouts.
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Kristina Whitten-O'Brien: Sometimes I know the town I used to live in 4 to 11%, which is, you know, unbelievable. Um, so, you know, really making sure that, you know, we get out, I, in my family, we get out and vote in every election and, um, you know, and, and then everything up to, you know, all other types of events, um, and really try to be, and, you know, siphon through a lot of that dis and disinformation that's out there as well, understanding that there are many different sides and experiences that people come to this with and trying to come from a place of calling people in instead of calling people out, um, I think is always important as well. Um, but I find it to be really exciting, really exhilarating. And, um, you know, I don't like door knocking. I don't like phone banking to be honest.
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Kristina Whitten-O'Brien: Um, but those are really important ways of being engaged and getting involved. And, you know, that's one of the things about VOT-ER is that, you know, we are seeing that healthcare professionals, social workers, doctors, nurses, are trusted professionals, and therefore can utilize that relationship and social workers all

[00:30:30] about relationships, utilizing that relationship with a patient or a client to get them to vote. We actually have, and I'm going off on a tangent here. So forgive me. But our, our data shows that 70% of the people that engage with our tools, they go and vote. And that's a high rate of success. And with, with these tools shows that if you're social worker, your nurse, your doctor talks to you about this, about voting. It's very, very successful and important and makes a difference. So it's the little stuff and it's the big stuff. And there are many, many ways to be politically engaged.

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Jesutofe Salau: Yeah. I like what you said. Um, those relationships are kind of what from, uh, action, because most of the time, you know, people respond to relationships and, you know, somebody just telling them to do something and you said something else, but I, I forgot it, but it really stood out to me. Oh, yes. So one of the re um, one of the reoccurring themes that I've been noticing in our podcast is, um, when people say that, what is it? I forgot when people, when people have been saying that, oh, voting at every level is really important. You know, that's one of the ways to remain politically engaged. Like people think that, you know, just the national, um, the national preside presidential election is like the big one, but voting at every level, something that has been reoccurring. And I just want to emphasize that one of the ways that we can remain politically engaged is voting at every level. [00:31:30] So in your personal pursuits, and in what ways have you seen your engagement in politics yield results in your area of practice? So I've known you worked with a lot of policies if it's like a policy success that was passed through just anything. [00:32:00]

Kristina Whitten-O'Brien:

Yeah. So, uh, so this is really, this is great cause, um, I am, uh, teaching a child welfare policy class right now for Boston university. And we are, you know, kind of going through the history of child welfare policy and our students, students were talking about the adoption and state families act that was passed in 1998. And I'm like, okay, I know that was a long time ago, but that was like the biggest piece of legislation that impacted my career at the time. And it really elevated the importance of safety, permanency, and wellbeing for kids. And the whole reason why the legislation was passed was on a national level to address foster care drift and to move kids who are kind of lingering in foster care into permanent situations, into prioritize safety for kids. So, um, so that was something that was really critical. So out of that were a lot of grants in the agency that I worked at at the time children's friend and service in Providence, Rhode Island received one of the grants. [00:32:30] [00:33:00]

Kristina Whitten-O'Brien:

So we had like three years to put together this adoption support and preservation program. We attached a research component to it. And, um, you know, the idea was that, yes, you can move these kids from foster care into permanent families, but these families and kids need support in order to be successful because they were also seeing a high rate of adoption disruption and dissolution where kids would, you know, have a behavior issue in the family and be like, you know what, we're all set we're done. So we wrapped around services to the families to preserve the family. So when the grant ran out, there was no more money because [00:33:30]

[00:34:00] there was only a set amount of money. So we actually had to go and testify before the state legislature in Rhode Island to have the state adopt the, the, the program, uh, and, and have it come under state funding so that, you know, the grant was the seed money from the federal government and the state picked it up.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: [00:34:30] So we went and I remember being part of the planning of the panel. And that was actually when I first testified before a state legislature. So, you know, those were things that, again, you know, I was the manager of the program. I had started out as a clinician, but then because of what, how the program was designed and what we needed to do, like kind of all of those things from micro to macro and the advocacy and the political nature of it all, um, you know, kind of came together in that experience and, and it all started with this federal legislation and a policy change. So I think that was probably one of the most significant examples and something that was successful that, you know, we're really proud of. And I think the program's still going on today too, which is kind of cool.

Jesutofe Salau: [00:35:00] Awesome. So that originally grant funded program became a state funded program through, you know, your advocacy work and others, other people helped you as well, but that's a great success story. So what would you say to a social work student who is nervous about getting started with, of political social work or advocacy? What would you say to put their mind at ease?

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: [00:35:30] Yeah, so, um, so one of the things is that I think, you know, our profession of social work is grounded in the values of social justice, and it's actually part of our code ethics to be engaged in political action. So this is like kind of what we do. And when I start teaching, um, in my ethics course, we really frame that course with this idea of, you know, what is a political environment and what is, how does that impact the work that we do. And oftentimes you'll hear from students why don't like to talk about politics or whatever. And it goes back to what I said earlier about calling people in, instead of calling people out, like we really need to, um, you know, understand the, the climate and the context that we're working in. We need to not shy away from it because, you know, as social workers, we, we, I think [00:36:00] should, we need to understand and not just focus on, um, you know, one or the other.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: [00:36:30] And I think I've really tried to exemplify that in my career that, you know, you can dance across that social, that clinical and macro line, and really have that integration of, of those aspects and areas of work in your work. Um, and so, you know, I think really embrace it, understand that it's a, it's a part of, you know, the core of our profession and, you know, politicians are human and they're just like you and I, and, um, you know, and, you know, we really, we have expertise and life and lived experiences and that, that, that policy decision makers need to hear. And so, you know, I always think like the best background for a law or policy maker or politician would be a social worker. You know, we have exposure to policy. We [00:37:00] take courses in racial justice and oppression and, you know, we understand human behavior, um, and behavior of communities and society.

Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: [00:37:30] So, um, you know, I think it's, it's important and we shouldn't shy away from it. And, you know, that's one of the reasons why I think organizations like VO and voting is social work are really important because we're saying that social work students really need to be exposed to this. And so a real simple way to be engaged is to make sure you're registered to vote, to vote and talk to your friends, talk to your family members, talk to the people you work with about it. You know, it's not saying you have to vote for so and so, and that's one of the things with my organization now is that we're nonpartisan. And so it's just that you get out and vote and that other people understand and voting is the number one simple way that you can dip your toe in the water and really feel like you're, you're engaged and involved.

Jesutofe Salau: [00:38:00] Yeah, that's, that's good advice. So first we need to embrace the fact that this is what we're called to do. And another thing that you said is like, we need to begin to see ourselves as experts. You know, know, I think maybe that's why there's kind of some hesitance to get involved or to speak up is because we don't see ourselves as an expert, but really we are, you know, we're the ones who are working with the individuals or working in the organization. So yeah, we used to begin to see ourselves as experts and just get that confidence in ourselves and begin to advocate and begin to get involved. So I think I'm going to end with this question just to kind of like, see a little bit of what you would've done differently. So if you could start all over again with political social record advocacy, what would you have done a lot more of?

[00:39:00] Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: Oh, another difficult question. Um, you know, I would say that, you know, and all, all, actually, I'm really happy where I am right now. Um, and I feel like the field of social work offers endless possibilities, um, and you know, skills are transferable across populations and issues. Um, if I have gone back, you know, one thing I think I would've done differently, I would've liked to have done is, uh, after I graduated with my master's degree, I, I moved to the Washington DC area and I work for the prince Georges county department of child welfare. Um, and I'd, I, we would go downtown DC and I would drive by health and human services and I'd be like, Sunday, I wouldn't go there. And so, you know, I never was really in Washington DC or worked on the hill. Yeah. I've worked at the Massachusetts state house.

[00:40:00] Kristina Whiton-O'Brien: I've been at the Rhode Island state house. Um, but I've never really been down in DC. And the work I do now is national and some of our, my colleagues are in DC, but, um, I think it might be kind of neat to spend a little bit more time in DC. It could be really frustrating too, who knows, but, um, you know, I think, think that's, that's really it. Um, and I just wanted to also send one more message. Um, and you had referenced it prior to giving me this last question is that, you know, we are powerful as a profession and voting is our power and, you know, our experience and the lived experience of the clients that we with. Um, you know, it's so, so important that, um, you know, everybody's voices are heard. And so I guess just also maybe to realize that, you know, we have the power to make a difference and I, that may seem kind of pie in the sky or really optimistic. But, um, you know, I

[00:41:00] think we all really need to acknowledge that and that, um, you know, we have an obligation too, when it comes to that in, in terms of how we use our power. So

Jesutofe Salau: I love that message. We are powerful as professionals that is really true. We are professionals and we are powerful because, you know, social work is one skills that kind of get a little bit, you know, totes aside or whatever, but, you know, let us, let us not allow it to continue that way and let us, you know, use our voices and use our education that we receive, use our experiences to begin to speak up and begin to, you know, take our positions in those high places. So thank you for that message. Thank you, Kristina, for spending time with me today. Thank you for all of our, for joining us for another episode of social work. I hope we were able to learn something today that empowers you to become more politically engaged and helps you shape a better tomorrow until next time.

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