

Estevan woman Larissa Smeltzer named a Social Work Champion

Estevan Mercury -- Published: March 20, 2020 12:48 AM



Larissa Smeltzer is a Social Work Champion and a walk-in counsellor with the Envision Counselling and Support Centre. Photo submitted

Estevan's Larissa Smeltzer is one of five Social Work Champions from across the province being recognized in honour of Saskatchewan's Social Work Week from March 16-22.

The announcement was made Monday morning.

Smeltzer is currently a walk-in counsellor at Envision Counselling and Support Centre for clients in the southeast region of Saskatchewan, as part of a province-wide initiative funded and led by Family Services Saskatchewan.

"The beautiful part about walk-in is its purpose, which is really to prevent people from falling through the cracks," Smeltzer said in her Social Work Champion bio. "Walk-in is free of mandates which means anyone can access the service and it acts as a catch-all for people. I will see anything from addictions, to mental health, to relationship issues, to work stress in any given day."

According to her bio, a spark grew inside her for social justice after attending a youth conference in Grade 11 that introduced her to the realities of human trafficking. It led her to become a registered social worker.

"What I like best about being a social worker is the chance to be able to meet so many beautiful human beings and seeing change, whether systemic or on the ground level. I also love that every day I am given the space to learn, grow and reflect in who I am as a person and what I can bring to each session."

Smeltzer was initially skeptical if she had made the right choice in pursuing a career in social work, but she says that thought quickly faded as she grew into her program and began her career path.

For her first two years of post-secondary study, she attended Redeemer University College in Hamilton, where she was enrolled in the sociology/social work program. She then transferred to the University of Waterloo's Renison University College, where she completed a bachelor of arts in social development studies.

She was then accepted into Renison's bachelor of social work program, where she continued to thrive.

Smeltzer said that one of the defining moments of her education was when she was able to do her work placement at the White Owl Native Ancestry Association.

“This placement was monumental in the development of my approach,” she recalls. “During my placement I was honoured to learn from Ojibway Nation teachings and to be guided in becoming a better ally. This placement led me to adopt an authentic person-centered, holistic approach to my work. I always want to bring honour to this placement as I believed it is foundational to how I have developed in the field.”

After graduating, she worked with Welcome Home Refugee House in Waterloo, Ont., where she had the opportunity to share space and walk along with women, men and children from all over the world.

She was able to provide support to newly-arrived refugees and help them to settle into a new way of life.

Smeltzer then became the lead youth support worker for Notre Dame House, which is the only youth shelter in Hamilton. She worked with youth ages 16-21 on their journey of wellness, where she enjoyed the chance to combine front-line support skills and leadership responsibilities.

“I learned so much from each youth that came in the doors,” said Smeltzer. “They are resilient, resourceful, strong, brave, courageous, creative and most of all, incredibly brilliant in so many ways.”

After Notre Dame House, Smeltzer transitioned back to her hometown of Estevan and was hired as the interpersonal violence and abuse counsellor with Envision. She provided counselling to anyone who was a survivor or secondary survivor of interpersonal violence.

“What I liked most about this position was having the honour to be a part of many different peoples healing journey,” she said. “It is still what I love most about being a counsellor – when you see the pain subside a bit and see people choose life, it is incredibly rewarding.”

Smeltzer holds space for anyone and everyone to feel comfortable to start, continue, and move through their healing journey. As part of a walk-in, she provides free one-hour sessions rooted in brief solution-focused therapy – something she says is a service that has been needed for a long time in the communities Envision serves.

Smeltzer encourages others to consider a career in social work if you are interested in having an impact on the world.

“As my dad likes to remind me so often, a social worker, a session or a moment can be the difference between life and death for someone. A safety plan, whether it is for suicide, domestic violence, homicidal ideation, etc., can quite literally save a person’s life. Social workers are vessels of change and make a difference by showing up and being there at times when no one else can or will.”

The SASW governs the profession of social work in the province. The member-based organization was established in October 1962, and has grown from an active membership of 83 to almost 2,000 registered members.