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Dr. Jennifer Greenfield

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University of Denver - Interviewer

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Dr. Jennifer Greenfield

Abstract

Interview of Dr. Jennifer Greenfield.

Keywords

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Publication Statement

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Dr. Jennifer Greenfield

Graduate School of Social Work

Anit Tyagi¹, on behalf of the Editorial Board

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1 TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF, SUCH AS WHERE YOU WENT TO SCHOOL, HOW YOU BECAME INTERESTED IN YOUR MAJOR RESEARCH AREAS, AND HOW YOU FOUND YOUR WAY TO DU.

I have a Bachelor's degree in English from Albright College, a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. After finishing that degree, I worked in communications for a variety of nonprofit organizations, and on the side, I frequently volunteered for political campaigns and groups engaged in advocacy on social issues. Eventually, I found myself working for a nonprofit that provided tutoring and mentoring for children living in shelters in Washington, D.C. That work led me to the field of social work. I decided to pursue social work education, first receiving an MSW from Saint Louis

University, then going on for a Ph.D. at Washington University in St. Louis. Though I grew up on the East Coast of the U.S., I had always wanted to move west, and I was eager to find a job that would allow me to do community-engaged policy work as a scholar and faculty member. The job offer from DU felt like a dream come true.

2 WHAT ARE YOUR TEACHING INTERESTS? WHAT IS YOUR "TEACHING PHILOSOPHY"?

I teach about the policymaking process and how social workers and researchers can influence the laws and regulations that are passed and implemented at the local, state, national, and tribal levels. I very much believe in walking the walk, not just talking the talk, so I remain active in policy analysis and advocacy as well. I bring my real-world experiences to the classroom and invite my students to join me in my work in the community. I believe that each student brings their own unique expertise into the classroom, and so my classroom is a place where we pool our knowledge and our questions, and we actively engage with current events and current debates as we practice the skills students need to achieve their goals, which usually center around changing the world in one way or another!

3 WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN THE FIELD THAT YOU WORK IN? WHAT DREW YOU TO SOCIAL WORK?

Before entering graduate school, I thought that social work was narrowly focused on individual-level concerns such as mental health, child welfare, and so on. It was a friend who first encouraged me to learn more about the field, because the work I was doing with volunteers and children in the shelters in D.C. was closely aligned with social work, but I was doing the work without the training I needed to be effective. As I learned more about social work, I realized that social work was concerned not just with the troubles of individuals, but also with the social and political contexts that shaped those troubles, the "upstream" causes of

the social problems I cared about. One of my internships in my Master's program sent me to the same community organizing training program where Barack Obama was trained as a community organizer, and a few months later I was giving oral testimony at the Missouri state legislature and organizing press conferences in support of Medicaid expansion. It was thrilling to see how evidence-based policy analysis could be paired with the impactful testimony of people with lived experience to influence lawmakers on important issues like health care access. And I love being able to link the individual-level concerns with the broader social and political processes. It means that every day, the job looks a little different!

4 DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT RESEARCH IN LAYMAN'S TERMS. IN OTHER WORDS, DESCRIBE THE VERY BASICS OF THE FIELDS YOU STUDY AND TEACH AND THEIR COMMON APPLICATIONS.

My research began with a focus on how health insecurity and financial insecurity are linked. At the individual level, financial stress can lead to health concerns, but poor health often leads to decreased income and wealth. At the societal level, these dynamics are evident in the health disparities we witness between those who earn the least in our society and those who earn the most. Higher earners tend to have better health, better access to health care, and increased wealth accumulation over time. I was interested in studying the bidirectional relationship between health and wealth, and the ways in which social policies can influence this relationship. Does improving access to health care increase income and wealth? Does stabilizing employment through mechanisms like paid family and medical leave also help to improve health and increase wealth over time? These questions have led me to research a variety of policy topics, including paid family and medical leave, minimum wage laws, paid sick leave, TANF programs, and so on. I have become something of a policy generalist over time, in part because of opportunities to partner with state legislators and state agencies to answer policy questions they brought to me, and in part because policy wins, such as passing Colorado's minimum wage ballot initiative in 2016 and the paid family and medical leave initiative in 2020, have led to new sets of questions. I love being able to tailor my research to the pressing questions of the day. It makes the work feel relevant and always interesting!

5 WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE TO IMPROVE HOW WORK IN YOUR FIELD IS DONE? IN OTHER WORDS, WHAT LEGISLATION MIGHT YOU PASS OR WHAT POLICIES WOULD YOU CHANGE AND WHY?

I still believe that expanding access to health care is a vital concern, and although the Affordable Care Act has expanded access significantly, cost of insurance and cost of actual care remain barriers to too many people. In addition, our health care system is still built to exclude, as is evidenced, for instance, in the egregiously poor health care access and outcomes among Black Americans and LGBTQ+ folk. There is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that every person in this country has access to quality, affordable, accessible health care as a basic standard of existence. And, of course, it is difficult to mention health care without also mentioning housing and food as other basic human needs that are currently out of reach for too many people.

6 CAN YOU SHARE A TURNING POINT OR DEFINING MOMENT IN YOUR WORK AS A RESEARCHER?

One pivotal moment in my career was the birth of my twin boys in 2013. Like many twins are, my kids were born preterm, and they spent their first month of life in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) in Denver. I had just finished a dissertation that looked at the impact of caregiving on the income and wealth of caregivers for older adults, but realized quickly that having hospitalized infants was just as likely to interrupt a person's income and career as caregiving for an aging parent. The experience also drove home how important paid family leave was in making sure I could stay employed and keep a roof over my head while my kids were in the hospital. Suddenly, the experiences of new parents and aging caregivers were linked in a new way in my mind, and I decided to expand my research beyond the previous focus on "aging issues." The next year, I launched a study of the experiences of mothers of hospitalized infants in Colorado. With support from Public Good and PROF grants from DU, that study ended up gathering longitudinal data from over 200 mothers and my research team, which includes M.D.s, a nurse scientist, and several social work Ph.D. students and alumni, has published eight peer-reviewed articles from the study, with more on the way.

7 TELL ME WHAT YOU LIKE TO DO WHEN YOU AREN'T WORKING ON RESEARCH.

I love being outside, so finding new places to hike in Colorado is one of my passions when I'm not working. I also love photography; my hikes are often slowed down

by frequent stops to take pictures, and I hope to improve my astrophotography skills in the near future. My twins love to have me join them in Minecraft and Roblox, so when we're not outside, you'll find me in those virtual worlds after school sometimes. And I also continue to do volunteer work in the community, including as a peer-support person for new parents in the NICU.

8 IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME AND GIVE ADVICE TO YOURSELF BEFORE YOU BEGAN YOUR CAREER, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

I would tell myself to talk to my professors when I was struggling. I had hard times at various points in my educational career, especially as a sophomore in college, and in my second semester of my Master's program, and I was too embarrassed to tell my professors what was going on. Now that I'm on the other side of that, I realize how much most professors really want to help, and I wish I had been more willing and able to talk to mine back then. I work really hard as a professor to share about my own less-than-stellar moments as a student so that my students will realize how common those experiences are. I genuinely want students to succeed, and I know life can throw a lot of hurdles at us when we least expect them. Offering care and understanding is now one of my most urgent goals as a professor.

9 WHAT IS THE MOST FRUSTRATING, AND MOST REWARDING ACTIVITY, RESPECTIVELY, IN YOUR DAY-TO-DAY WORK?

One of the most challenging aspects of faculty life for me is the differing time horizons for the various tasks on my to-do list. I may think I have a good idea of what my week looks like, but one email, or ten, can change all that in a flash because a journal editor may give a short deadline for article revisions, a student may have an urgent need to talk with me, or something like COVID-19 or a natural disaster may prompt an unexpected need for new policy development. There have been countless times when I had to drop everything to draft an email or an op-ed in order to respond to a pressing issue, which ends up putting more long-term, but equally important, tasks on the back burner. It can be very hard to find balance between responding to the urgent stuff while also making sure that the more mundane stuff continues to move forward, which is why I'm perennially behind on answering emails!

By far the most rewarding part of my job is working with students and seeing their careers take off. Right now, most of my work is with Ph.D. students, and it is both thrilling and humbling to see them grow and excel

as scholars and instructors. It sounds like a cliché, but I genuinely learn so much from my students through reading their work, doing my own research to help answer their questions, and listening to their concerns about our world and our profession. I hope I never lose my willingness to learn from them, because I know I've become a better person and a better scholar through my engagement with the students at both GSSW and the Scrivner Institute for Public Policy at Korbel. One thing that I'd say to current students is this: please stay in touch! Most professors love to hear how our former students are doing!

10 WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE NEXT BIG DISCOVERY OR PROBLEM SOLVED IN YOUR FIELD?

There are so many ways in which social work is engaged in society's most urgent issues that it is hard to choose just one area to focus on. With that said, I've been particularly inspired by the work of my colleague, Dr. Lisa Reyes Mason, which is at the intersection of climate change and social justice. I recently had the opportunity to join her research team in a policy analysis project that will be published soon in the *Journal of Policy Practice and Research*, and I would love to do more work focused on how to enact urgently needed policies to address climate change, and especially how to center the needs and voices of marginalized and environmentally vulnerable communities in that work. Although the many policy issues I've focused on feel urgent, I have to say that failing to mitigate the climate crisis puts a shadow on all the other good we're trying to do in our city, state, country, and world. I think we need all hands, and all disciplines, on the task when it comes to addressing climate change right now.