



Celebrating a longstanding career in social work:

An interview with Gretchen Precey

Kirsty Ayakwah: Hello, and welcome to another episode of The Social Work Community Podcast, a podcast where you hear directly from social workers about the issues affecting your sector. Whether you're a student or an experienced social worker, frontline or management, this podcast is for you. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, the senior careers editor at Community Care, and in the first of our episodes in Season Two we speak to Gretchen Precey, an independent social worker with a wealth of experience working in children's services that spans almost fifty years.

Gretchen qualified as a social worker in 1977 and spent over twenty years working directly for local authorities before establishing herself as an independent social worker, where she combines direct assessment work with children and families and consultancy to practitioners.

As Community Care marks its fiftieth anniversary this year, we wanted to find out what the social work landscape was like through those decades and how that has shaped Gretchen's career. We find out what keeps Gretchen in the sector and what advice she'd offer to the next generation of social workers. Let's find out. [0:01:25.8]

Thank you. It's so nice to see you in the flesh. Or sort of...remotely in the flesh! I haven't met anyone who's been in social work as long as you, and I know that you'll be celebrating your fifty years soon. [0:01:36.2]

Gretchen Precey: Mm.

Kirsty Ayakwah: In the next three years, something like that? [0:01:41.2]

Gretchen Precey: Yep. It kind of coincides when I think I'm going to retire.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Oh, really? [0:01:46.4]

Gretchen Precey: I've been around full circle.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Excellent. Fantastic. I thought we'd start by talking a little bit about your career. What inspired you to get into social work? [0:01:56.2]

Gretchen Precey: Well, it almost feels like it's the family business. You can probably tell from my accent that I wasn't born here. I was born in the United States but I've lived here for 52 years. And I kind of felt like I came into the family business when I went into social work. Both of my parents were social workers in the United States. My father was in residential children's work for a long time in the days when there were big children's homes, almost kind of like Barnardo's and Barkingside used to be. And the staff lived on the grounds, so I tell people I was raised in a children's home, which is kind of true because we were there. And you do sort of live it and



breathe it. And my mother also qualified as a social worker but she worked in schools, which was probably kind of the equivalent of educational welfare officers in the UK.

So it was sort of bred in the bone. I have an uncle who's a probation officer and one of my cousins works with people with learning disabilities. So it's sort of what I was born into.

Yeah, I kind of tried not to. I kind of tried not to go into social work because it just seemed so unimaginative! But it was what I liked and it was what I was interested in. And I just am fascinated by people's stories and people's lives, and just understanding how other people see the world. And it's a real privilege, I think, to be in that position with people at the time in their lives that social workers might be needed.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah, absolutely. I'd agree with that. So did you start your social work as an adult in America or did that start in the UK? [0:03:37.5]

Gretchen Precey: No. I came here when I was nineteen. And I had to pick up my university course again because I was midway through my university degree in the States. And then I worked...I did a degree in sociology at Leeds and I worked as an unqualified social worker in a child and family adolescent unit in Leeds, at St James's Hospital.

And then I went and did the one-year CQSW, as it was then. And then I started working for Bradford Child Guidance Unit, soon to become Child and Adolescent Family Mental Health Services.

So yes, I did it anyway, even though I didn't think I was going to. I went into social work.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And because you were training in America and then you came to the UK and then you trained again, I'm not sure if you were able to see any similarities or differences in both countries? [0:04:35.9]

Gretchen Precey: Well, I think in many ways the UK is becoming what America was a long time ago, where state services seem to be more of an agency for pointing people in the direction of services. So adoption services, family therapy services, care for elderly people. Those kinds of needs are what in the States was the private sector organised by churches. There was a lot more church-affiliated services there. And people who did the more direct therapeutic assessment work with families were more in private practice. I think the only exception to that was that the state services also were child protection services, so that's pretty much what they became. And I have to say, I think things have moved already in that direction in the UK now. But when I first started you were able to do a lot more in social work. It was a much more holistic role than it is now, and you did work more directly with people and more directly with families, rather than commissioning that out to another agency, and I think that's becoming more common here than it was.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And do you think that's good or bad, or do they both have their benefits and disadvantages? [0:06:03.3]



Gretchen Precey: Well, I suppose I like to work the way I like to work, and that's what I'm used to and that's what really gives me a buzz. I don't so much like having to maybe do an assessment of what's needed and then recommend or make referrals to other agencies to take it on. I think there is something about relationships, and I know that relationships have had such a high profile in the UK particularly since the Munro report after the death of Baby P. And I do think that to be able to see the same person, to form a relationship with that person in depth at a very difficult time in the client's life, and for that person not to change or keep on changing...I think they get a much better service and I do think the professional gets a lot more job satisfaction because you do feel that you are really alongside that individual and you get to know them, usually. And if you don't, and if there's problems, then you learn how to work through them. Then you learn how to...you know, we have to agree to disagree but let's go on, rather than closing the case or handing it onto somebody else. And sometimes it's working through that that gives you the most progress, perhaps, for that individual to see that relationships have to be worked at. You know, you do have to stick with it.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So talk to us about some of the pivotal moments in your career.
[0:09:25.0]

Gretchen Precey: Well, I think one of the key moments in my career was the discovery of the extent of child sexual abuse, and kind of literally learning by the seat of our pants regarding how to cope with that. And I was working in north Norfolk so it wasn't, you know, an urban area with lots of resources. And particularly in the aftermath of the Cleveland Enquiry.

Kirsty Ayakwah: The Cleveland Enquiry Report was published in 1988. The report followed the removal of over 120 children from their families in Cleveland after serious concerns were raised about sexual abuse that was highlighted through medical examinations. The judgement to remove the children was challenged, leading to the enquiry report. Most of the children were returned to their families. Gretchen explains more. [0:10:22.1]

Gretchen Precey: And the events leading up to the Cleveland Enquiry as well. It just seemed to be an explosion of concern about children who had been sexually abused within their families. And understanding about how we then interviewed them, particularly when the memorandum of good practice came in and we had to interview children for evidential purposes, which was very different to how we were used to speaking to them before, much more formal.

And in those days we didn't have interview suites. I had a video camera in the back of my car and we used to set it up in the child's front room and talk to them there. And you know, sometimes talking to them in places where the abuse may actually have taken place.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Wow.

Gretchen Precey: And talking about people in their family who might actually still be there, at home. So it was, you know, just think about the kind of permutations of that. It was high-risk. We didn't really know what we were doing. And I've been involved with police raids, I've been



involved in, you know, waiting for the perpetrator to leave for work at six o'clock in the morning and then go in and remove the children or the police arrest him. There was a lot of high drama, I have to say, at that point.

And I think it also made me much more aware of police procedures. And I did end up teaching what became the Achieving Best Evidence training course when I moved to Norfolk. And then when I moved to Sussex. And it was really the golden days. We had two weeks' residential, police and children's social workers. And we would be able to do practice interviews and critique each other's work. We did quite a lot of just the dynamics of direct work with children. I think that did more than anything else to try and regularise the relationships between police and social workers because I think there has been quite a bit of miscommunication and lack of understanding about what each other's roles might be. And working together in that way, I think, made quite a big difference.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And we talk a lot about co-production now, so that seems to be something that was maybe at the beginning or you were at the forefront of working in that way with police? [0:12:52.8]

Gretchen Precey: Yeah, yeah. Particularly with child sexual abuse because one of the phrases that kept going on in my mind is the difficult of resolving the needs of the child and the demands of the criminal justice system, which didn't always sit well together. And I think each of us kind of tended to protect our own priorities as far as what we were doing, and really to the frustration of the other agency that felt, 'Well, this isn't any good for the child,' 'But this isn't any good for the evidence.' So it was hard to resolve that and keep the child in focus all the time.

In this next segment, Gretchen talks about her interest in Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy, now called Fabricated Induced Illness, a condition coined by Professor Roy Meadows, in which parents either fabricate that their child has an illness or induce it. [0:16:01.5]

Are there any examples which stick in your mind where you were able to, I guess, make a transformative difference or be part of that transformative difference for a child or a family? [0:16:14.0]

Gretchen Precey: I think there were times when I went to bat for people and maybe was taking some risks. I've got a particular family in mind. I have an interest in Fabricated or Induced Illness, what we used to call Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy. And this...I was involved in the prosecution of this mother who lost two of her children because of concerns regarding FII. And they went elsewhere and they were not doing well. And she was a mother who didn't...she visited them whenever it was possible to visit them. She went back to court to have the care order revoked at any opportunity. And then she got pregnant. And then it was a kind of, 'So what are you going to do about this, children's services? Are you going to take this baby from me? Or are you going to give me a chance?'

And I was asked to come back into the fray because she knew me. And I knew that the children were not settled in their foster placements. They desperately wanted to go home. And my...you



know, the baby was born, the baby was healthy. My recommendation was that under a lot of supervision, lots of coworking particularly with the hospitals, that she should keep this baby and I think we should think seriously about these children coming back. And they did.

And then amazingly – and this was all when I was still...had a proper job and I wasn't an independent social worker – but not too many years ago I had a phone call from this mother, and kind of apropos of nothing it was around Christmas time. And she said, 'You probably don't remember me but...' And as soon as I heard her voice, oh yeah!

Kirsty Ayakwah: Wow!

Gretchen Precey: 'I remember you!' And she said, 'I just thought I'd let you know how everything turned out because you were the one who stood by me.'

So she said that the eldest had gotten married and they had a child. And his younger sister had just finished university. And the baby that I recommended should go into her care was just finishing their A-Levels. And she said they really turned out. And she may have been telling me a pack of lies. I have no idea. And the other thing that struck me is, you know, I need to put boundaries around this relationship. I don't mind talking to her at length for one time but I can't resurrect the relationship I had with her from before. And she never called again.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So just moving on and looking into you leaving statutory, I think that was in 1999? So about twenty years after starting out. What made you or what propelled you into moving? [0:23:17.8]

Gretchen Precey: Well, at that point I was managing a child protection unit in Brighton, which is where I had all the work that I did in Sussex was at this child protection unit, which began as a unit to try and develop a centre of excellence in child sexual abuse. But we did lots of other kinds of work as well. And it was multi-agency, it was...it had its difficulties but I think we did excellent work and I loved it.

But then we kind of began to come under the kind of regime about using questionnaires, using material that wasn't...that inhibited, I think, making the relationship. And also looking at things more from an objective, rather than a subjective point of view. So the relationship seemed to take second place, to delivering questionnaires, to delivering other ways of trying to measure relationships between children and families. A little bit like the PAMS programme, working with adults with learning disabilities and looking at their childcare skills.

And we were part of a study that the Department for Education wanted us to trial some of these. And I just...I couldn't get past it. I didn't...I was the one that had to implement it and I couldn't do it. And I was getting seriously off-message. And I didn't want to bring what was a really good service into disrepute because I was seen as a maverick. So I thought...and that was in my own head. I mean, nobody was telling me, 'You've signed up for this. You know, you're an employee.' But I got out. And it just...I was in such real conflict about what I thought was the best way of going about this versus how we were being asked to practice. And that was when I resigned. And left the best job I ever had. Yeah.

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Kirsty Ayakwah: So there's some regrets there? [0:25:32.4]

Gretchen Precey: Well, I think it was a really good way of working. But it got...to my mind it got diluted. It got off-focus. And I didn't want to be part of that.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So being an independent social worker allows you to focus on those relationships, something that you said from the beginning. [0:25:51.8]

Gretchen Precey: Yeah.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah.

Gretchen Precey: So what I do as an ISW, I still do quite a lot of training. I do a lot of safeguarding training and particularly aimed at people who work therapeutically with children. I work with probation on developing professional curiosity. I still do some training in FII when I'm asked too, which doesn't come up all that frequently anymore.

I've also becoming very interested in safeguarding disabled children and working with everything that comes with having a child who has got special needs for whom we have to think about neglect in a different way, for whom we have to think about vulnerability to abuse in a different way. And parents who are really stretched. And there was something on the radio just now about the number of children with special needs who are not having the services that they require because the child healthcare plans are just backlogged. They've been identified and assessed as needing these resources; they're not happening. So you know, there's a lot of ways in which disabled children face incredibly huge barriers to protecting them but also developing their potentials.

And I still do direct works with the court, directly with the court, that's sometimes commissioned by solicitors individually themselves, sometimes by local authorities who...I'm working on a special guardianship order at the moment, which was commissioned by a local authority. You know, although it seems quite straightforward to just do an SGO, there's so much behind it and, you know, it's not...nothing is straightforward. You just kind of lift the lid and you see a lot of controversial issues that you usually need to take an opinion on or evidence, or think about what this means as far as the child is concerned.

And I do consultation, which can sometimes mean partnership reviews. So I've done quite a few partnership reviews and taken a really deep, deep dive into where were the services when some of these things happened that led to a tragedy, you know, either a child dying or being seriously injured.

Kirsty Ayakwah: I mean, I feel like you do so many different elements within social work, that that possibly is what keeps you in the sector so many years later. But tell me. [0:28:11.7]

Gretchen Precey: I think so. It does. I'm just glad that I don't have to face the pressure of local authority social work. And although, you know, sometimes I am in quite severe disagreement with a decision that's been made or the time that it takes for decisions to happen or for the turnover of staff and, you know, sometimes I'm working with a family for three or four



months and I'm the only social worker that's stayed with them. They've had five or six social workers in the course of that time. Which is frustrating with me but it's hugely frustrating for the family.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah.

Gretchen Precey: So yes, I don't think I would have lasted this long if I had to be part of the state system.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Wow. I mean, we speak to social workers all the time and, you know, for some there is burnout within maybe six, eight years of qualifying. And also, sometimes when you speak to social workers they have a quite rigid view of how they can progress. So it's really nice to listen to your story and how you've been able to pivot. I mean, what advice would you give to a newly qualified today who wants to develop their career? [0:29:23.6]

Gretchen Precey: I think it's important to hang onto your values. And we do talk about hearing the voice of the child. I'm not sure people are always as courageous as they should be in trying to understand, deliver services, keeping the interests of the child in mind. And sometimes that's not always working directly with the child but is kind of creating the conditions around the child that might strengthen the relationship with the mother or, you know, something that still focuses on what they child might need and what's best for them.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Like what, for example? [0:30:00.9]

Gretchen Precey: Well, I had a case a few months ago where there was concern about parental alienation. And my view was that the mother probably should have primary care of the child, and I thought maybe that the father's persistence in wanting to have shared care 50/50 was more to do with getting back at her than it was because he really wanted the child. And the child was...she didn't know really where she was. And it was...and there were a lot of other things involved in it too. But it was recommending that the mother have primary care, even though the court had given 50/50 because dads have rights. Well yes, dads do have rights but I think this particular dad was more oriented around depriving her, the mother, of what she knew she wanted, which was a kind of uninterrupted relationship in depth with this little girl. And that was his objective, I think. And you know, there were some child protection concerns about the child in his care. And that was kind of deprioritised in the name of, 'Yes, but he's the father. He has the right.' Which you know, yes, I'm not against that but I think that's another thing if you talked about starting out. It's not being too overly influenced by...not necessarily to ignore research and to look at, you know, what people have found about what works best in working with children and families, but there's no substitute for a good assessment. There's no substitute for kind of thinking about what might be going on here, testing your hypotheses.

And I also find a huge amount of risk aversion. You know, the number of children that seem to me to be removed from their families for reasons that a good piece of social work may have turned around and it didn't happen. And these children's lives are completely turned upside down.

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Kirsty Ayakwah: Do you think part of that is because of the negative perceptions that the public generally have about social work? [0:32:15.9]

Gretchen Precey: I think it's more to do with not wanting to be subject to a scandal, not wanting to have a child die or be very badly hurt on your watch. I do think that there was quite a shift and a moral panic following the death of Peter Connolly and everything that flowed from that. And you know, I think the Munro report was saying really sensible things that...they weren't new but I think it just brought them all together as far as what good social work is about. And yet I don't know how much newly qualifieds are really able to practise in that way, you know, whether it's the time or the caseload or the trust that management has in people's own individual skills. It does seem very driven by recording. You mentioned recording a few moments ago, the importance of the paperwork being up-to-date. Yeah, it's important that it's up-to-date and I don't deny that. But I think also we don't spend enough time directly with families and children, at the expense of writing down what we haven't done because we've been too busy writing it down! You know, it just seems a bit absurd.

Hopefully I can touch on Community Care, 'cause as you know we're celebrating fifty years this year. So what are your memories? I don't know if you ever picked up the first issue? [0:36:01.5]

Gretchen Precey: I don't know if I picked up the very first issue but it was on a Friday and this was hardcopy.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yes, yes.

Gretchen Precey: Maybe. It was delivered to the social work offices. I remember copies of *Community Care* lying around all over the place. I then subscribed to it. But I just thought it was really interesting and, you know, to kind of look at developments in practice and articles, special interest articles, about different forms of what social workers come across. Yes, I enjoyed reading it. It kind of opened up different aspects of social work apart from the one that...the kind of work that I was doing at the time.

So do you miss that it's not hardcopy? I mean, do you still keep up with what we write? [0:38:39.2]

Gretchen Precey: Um, yes. I get it online. And I do read it every week. And I am interested in, you know, hearing what's going on in other parts of the country.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. I think one thing that is interested about what you've said, you talked about social workers and maybe having the confidence to be, like, professionally curious or to challenge or to question. And I wonder if we go back to when you had started out versus now, you have a wealth of experience and I feel like you can lean on that if you want to challenge, you know, something that another senior leader has told you or a way of approaching supporting a child. And I wonder if people who are a lot younger in their career feel that brave to do that. [0:40:37.7]



Gretchen Precey: I don't think they do. I don't think they have the bank of experience to draw on. And I don't think I was able to do that with as much confidence earlier in my career. So yeah, I think some of it just comes with having gone around the block a few times. And getting burnt. You know, I've had times when I've been really criticised in court for what I've said. And I think the thing that kind of makes me feel quite frustrated is if it's a finding of fact. If a judge said it happened, well it happened. But I'm not sure it did. And you can't question it. You know, you kind of start from the premise that, 'This is where we are beginning. This is what happened. And we work on it from there,' when I'm kind of thinking, 'Wait a minute. Can we just reconsider here a bit?' But the way the legal system is set up...and I think the legal system, if we're talking about confidence in workers, giving evidence in court is still daunting. Probably even more so now. Particularly online.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So basically, what's next for you? [0:42:10.2]

Gretchen Precey: I don't know, and I think maybe that's what's kept me hanging on so long! What would I do if I didn't do this? I've got seven grandchildren. I do see a lot of them. I'm very involved in my church. I moved to London ten years ago from Sussex, where I lived for 21 years and, you know, in an ideal, lovely town in Sussex. But I got a little bored so we moved up to London and it's just changed my life completely. So there's a whole lot more in London that I want to find out about.

And I think there are good things to discover. And I guess, you know, the kind of slowing down a bit, compared to the pace that I've been living at. I think it is slowing down anyway in that there's fewer requests for commissions for independent assessments because there's less money around. Same with training. Training is almost exclusively online now rather than face-to-face. So that, the market as far as what I offer, has changed. Which is probably not a bad thing because, you know, the volume of what I get through is less than it used to be, partly because there's less demand.

But it does keep me going, you know. And it's the relationships. It definitely is the relationships that get me up in the morning and get me on the train to go to the east side of nowhere on this godforsaken housing estate to try and find this mother and figure out what's happening. I think that's another thing is home visiting just seems to not be nearly as frequent as it used to be. And I think some of that is Zoom calls and online calls and inviting people into the office and that kind of thing. And you learn so much by just stepping over the threshold into somebody's front room.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. And also not knowing what you're going to expect when you get there. Is there anything else you'd like to share? [0:44:14.4]

Gretchen Precey: Well, I suppose I'd like to end on an encouraging note. I think it's still such an important profession for people who are often marginalised or forgotten or misunderstood. And I do think to have somebody who kind of represents the fact that there is hope, there's still some amount of care left in the community for people who are vulnerable, and you know, the pay is low, the conditions aren't very good, you're under a lot of pressure. But in a



way you're in a position to do things that nobody else can. And you know, that's your core business. And two of my kids are now in social work-related professions. So you know, I guess they kind of...

Kirsty Ayakwah: They're in the family business!

Gretchen Precey: They've [unclear – 0:45:07.2]. So yes, they are in the family business.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Brilliant. Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for giving me some of your time.

Gretchen Precey: You're very welcome.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Thank you for listening to this podcast. If you're a keen listener, why not check out some of the other podcasts in our Community Care library? Workforce Insights showcases important workforce and career issues impacting social workers, and is delivered in collaboration with local authorities and Trusts and other organisations. We have the Community Care Inform podcast series called Learn On The Go, where expert practitioners and academics discuss what the latest research, theories and practice models mean for social workers. All these podcasts are available on most platforms, including Spotify, Audible, Amazon and Apple podcast.

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