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Commentary: Nurturing careers of purpose in the Desert Southwest

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Marcia Runnberg

Posted: Tuesday, April 28, 2015 3:45 pm

By Marcia Runnberg

When it comes to social work in Arizona, the headlines can be depressing. It seems as if a day doesn't go by without horrific tales of pain and suffering inflicted on our community's most vulnerable: the young, the old, the poor and the sick. From the very top of our political systems to the gritty front lines in our neighborhoods, the human condition – and our reaction to the suffering and need for aid – are constantly under the microscope. Plenty of finger pointing, self-aggrandizing and denial foster what would seem to be a sad, self-fulfilling prophecy.

It might seem that social program mismanagement, leadership turnover and ongoing turmoil are spiraling out of control with little hope for people in need, nor for those tending to the needy. However, if you only listen to the naysayers and only read the headlines, you're only getting one side of the story. In our community there continues to be great positive energy, pioneering and brave work with keen leadership where a host of community members continue to truly make a difference in people's lives.

This work has an impact wider than only those who are on the receiving end. The community-wide benefits of social work extend to strengthen the economy and our workforce in measurable ways. In addition, our educational system continues to develop its key role in shaping the social leaders of today, tomorrow and of our next generation.

For instance, The College of St. Scholastica (CSS), a 103-year-old Catholic Benedictine college that prepares students for "a life with purpose," expanded its Minnesota campus to Arizona in 2014. CSS has a rich history in social work, health care and nursing education. It has forged a partnership with Mesa Community College (MCC), and this spring is offering a class, The Competency of Compassion, which emphasizes the importance of compassion in social work.



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This partnership further enhances the social work programs at not only MCC, but at other institutions of higher education throughout the Valley.

One of Arizona's finest practitioners and leaders in social work, Timothy Schmaltz, is co-instructing the Compassion class with me at MCC. He's president of the board of directors of the Arizona chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

While it may seem unnecessary or even counter-intuitive to "teach" compassion, when you think of the diverse and complex tableaux that is the reality of Arizona – a mix of cultures, socioeconomic groups and communities – a targeted and specific focus on training and education makes a great deal of sense. In order to be an effective helper in a healing profession such as social work, students need to understand that their personal calling and passion to help at-risk populations requires highly responsive knowledge, skills, and values.

Besides positive efforts on the educational side of the issue, we need heightened awareness and strategic leadership from our political leaders. The community can, and has, come together to help engage and educate, but we also need bipartisan support of our social service agencies - and the professionals in them - to help continue the positive momentum.

It is apparent in these times of poverty, violence, fear, and neglect, the social work profession is needed now more than ever. The silver lining is that social work is one of the fastest growing professions and one of the most versatile. For those interested, the work certainly promises a life with purpose and of great value.

• *Marcia Runnberg, MSW, is the social work program director for The College St. Scholastica Arizona's campus.*

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