AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER


ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: Mississippi John Hurt: “Pay Day.”

NANCY GROCE (Host): Welcome to America Works, excerpts from longer interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this episode of America Works features an interview with night nurse Jennifer Sgro in Chicago, Illinois. Documentarian Margaret Miles of Minneapolis received an Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center to interview workers in emergency homeless shelters and workers providing services to homeless people in three interrelated Midwestern cities of Bismarck, North Dakota; Minneapolis-St Paul, Minnesota; and Chicago, Illinois.

Jennifer Sgro works as a Nurse Practitioner with The Night Ministry in Chicago. Founded in 1976, The Night Ministry provides housing and healthcare to people who are homeless or who are living in low income situations. Sgro provides healthcare on the Ministry’s Outreach Bus, which travels to a different low-income Chicago neighborhood every evening. In this thoughtful interview, nurse Sgro talks about her job, her career, and the satisfaction she finds in her work.

INTERVIEW

Jennifer Sgro: I’m the nurse practitioner for the Night Ministry. It’s a full-time, paid position and so the job responsibilities are just to provide basic nursing tech care. Maybe a little more because there’s prescribing of medication. And so I go out on the outreach bus every night and people come to see me for any variety of health care issues going on with them.

Nursing is a second career for me. I was in genomic research for years and years before I decided to go back to nursing school. But I always had that-- I knew that I would work with underserved populations and because healthcare disparities and seeing that because of somebody’s economic circumstances, how they just don’t get the same kind of care as other people.
The Night Ministry has been operating for 40 years. And so, over time, there has been relationship built with the community that they know that we’re there. We offer a meal—it depends on what donations we get, or whatever. But there will be some food, drinks, and things like that. And then we have the case manager and then we have the health care. And so people come for all those reasons. Sometimes they just come because they’re lonely and they know that that’s kind of their social time. There’s going to be other people there that they can talk to; there’s going to be us that they can talk to; and that they feel connected to the world.

Margaret Miles:  Are you on the bus five days a week?

Jennifer Sgro:  Four to five days a week.

It’s part and parcel to kind of the whole circumstances. I’m not a psych nurse, but I find myself doing a lot of mental health things because it’s so intertwined into their overall health.

We have a limited supply of medications that we keep on stock. So, if somebody comes in with pain, or an asthma, you know, having asthma problems, and they are not connected into the system, I will make sure that they walk out of there with at least a rescue inhaler.

The pain meds that I give are real basic. Really, I mean, just over the counter: Ibuprofen, Tylenol; we have some hot patches. But it’s amazing, like, these people are very willing and receptive. They’re not into “what can you give me?” I give them these basic things, and then they come back and they say, “You know, that pain patch really helped me.” And so, it’s like, it’s good because... you can manage a lot of these things in kind of basic ways. You know like giving an ankle or wrist brace to somebody who’s got some pain or something like that. So a lot of basic stuff, but I think to them it’s really helpful.

For general health care, we have our case manager. And really, ultimately, our goal, or at least my goal is, because I can’t give them the care that they really need, I can be a little stop gap. But ultimately, we want to get them into the Affordable Care Act and the resources that are available to them to get them into primary care.

I’ve worked in the health care system. I have worked, you know, in some of the big hospitals around the area and some are great—I mean they really are. But there’s limitations that you have in those kind of traditional healthcare systems that I don’t really have. I’m a little more free to kind of see, like, what would happen if you just spent the time with somebody and let them talk. And it’s been a really life changing and profession changing experience that, I think, if you work in a traditional brick-and-mortar place you just – there’s more demands on your time and things like that, that you can’t address those things in a more comprehensive way.

There is not enough listening to the patient that I think that I’m able to do in this job. Because so much more is going on with them. In that, I think, the narrative of, at least, my professional career is that I feel like people just want their voice to be heard.
I had a lady that comes to the bus--I haven’t seen her in a while--but she’s very distrusting of anybody in a white coat, or whatever and... and I think there’s good reasons for that, but she had come up and she was suspicious of me, too. It took a little bit of time to get a little bit of trust there. Well, then she came back the next time, and then she started saying, “What are they wanting to do? What wrong with me?” And so I think I gave her that opportunity to just say--like she was saying, that “They were just gonna do those things to her.” And I said, “No. You have a decision, you’re the one in charge.” And I think just saying those words, it was just like she didn’t feel powerless anymore. So I try...that’s kind of my approach, I think, is to let them be in charge and me be there just as an assistant.

I don’t know if you have been down there, just south of here, but there is a whole, it’s like a city. It’s a whole neighborhood of tents. There’s hundreds of people there and I don’t think that existed eight years ago. So I can’t help but ask, what happened?

We have to ask ourselves, I think, as a society are we okay with this?

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC:  Mississippi John Hurt: “Pay Day.”

NANCY GROCE (Host):  You have been listening to Jennifer Sgro, a nurse practitioner on The Night Ministry’s Outreach Bus in Chicago, Illinois. She was interviewed by documentarian Margaret Miles for Miles’ Archie Green Fellowship on “Homeless Shelter Workers in the Upper Midwest.”

To listen to Margaret Miles’s entire interview with Jennifer Sgro as well as hundreds of other interviews with contemporary American workers, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife - - or just search online for the Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to this episode of America Works.

ANNOUNCER:  This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us @loc.gov.