

60 SECONDS WITH . . .

Joan Pennell, director of the Center for Family and Community Engagement and professor of social work

Joan Pennell's career in social work spans more than two decades, focusing on research of domestic violence, child abuse and community engagement. In Canada, she helped found the first shelter for abused women and their children in Newfoundland and Labrador. In 2008, she brought to NC State the Center for Family and Community Engagement, a public service and interdisciplinary research center whose aim is to provide outreach for families when they are confronted with something traumatic like abuse.

How does the center help NC State tackle issues like domestic violence and social justice?

It really is a way to engage people from different disciplines. Centers are not within a department. I've worked with psychologists, computer science, economics. The center also works with every county in North Carolina on child welfare training.

Whom is the center trying to help with its outreach?

It's child welfare [workers]. It's schools. Mental health. Juvenile justice. Community members. We have people who have delivered services and people who've experienced services during the training. It is important to hear it from someone who is actually doing the service because they understand the challenges a social worker or educator has. And to also hear from a parent who has struggled with their children or from a foster youth, it just opens eyes.

What are the major obstacles to keeping the family unit stable?

People don't have enough resources. I'm talking about issues of poverty. I'm speaking mainly about the U.S. right now. We have such regional disparities. If we look at our own state, people are flowing into the metropolitan areas, and it's a shame because it means communities are getting abandoned.

When there are headlines about domestic violence, like ex-Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and his wife last year, do social workers handle that as a teachable moment?

We have the National Association of Social Workers, which is very proactive in addressing these issues. It is part of our code of ethics to be advocates for people who have high needs. We not only are advocates, but what we try to do is work with people. So it's very much building linkages. Really supporting people to be advocates for themselves.

Do you still see the same issues you did 25 years ago, or have new issues emerged in family homes?

We are much more aware nowadays about LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning] issues that we would not have been before. That's an area we're increasingly working on at the center. . . .Because so often adolescents who are going through, feeling out their sexual identity and orientation, they may no longer be welcomed in their family home.

—Chris Saunders

