

Jemma Spruston Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 89

Tanya Griffiths 0:16

Hello and thank you for tuning in to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. My name is Tanya, your host, and a student intern with VAMS while completing my social justice practicum. Today, I have the privilege of being in dialogue with Jemma Spruston. Jemma is a certified music therapist and career development practitioner currently working in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. Over the years, she has worked with a range of populations in a variety of settings, doing music therapy, case management support work and providing career development services in her free time, Jemma enjoys spending time with her dog, catching up with friends, and doing any and all things creative. Hi, Jemma. Thank you for joining us today.

Jemma Spruston 1:02

Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Tanya Griffiths 1:05

I am really excited to have you on here and to really talk to the work and all the things that you've experienced working in the Downtown Eastside, and also the changes that you've experienced too with your career as a music therapist.

Jemma Spruston 1:20

Yeah, yeah, for sure.

Tanya Griffiths 1:23

So I guess we can begin with, can you tell us more about the work you do in the Downtown Eastside?

Jemma Spruston 1:30

Yeah. So I work at Union Gospel Mission UGM in Vancouver's downtown Eastside. So social services organization that has a variety of programs. We do outreach services. We run both men's and women's stabilization and recovery programs. We do meals, shelter, case management services, different types of supportive housing, both long term and

transition throughout the Lower Mainland, and it's super exciting. Most recently, we opened two new women's recovery houses and programs in Langley and Victoria. So the work that I do, I am a career development advisor, and I basically work with people from our programs to do anything career related. So I run workshops. I meet one on one with people. We work on anything from resumes, cover letters, workplace communication, work life balance. We have an internal scholarship program, which is awesome— it sets people up with funds and technology to pursue any type of education. We have an in-house internship program as well. I help with career planning, with finding volunteer placements, employment and education, readiness, applications, searching, interviews, return to work, plans, accommodations, really, the list goes on, anything that supports the individual in their career based off of their hopes, their aspirations, their goals. And we try and take a very holistic approach, because we recognize that you can't easily compartmentalize the different areas of your life. Career is so connected and intertwined with our community, with our mental health, with our physical health, it's all so yeah, mixed, mixed in together in this kind of beautiful mosaic. And so yeah, we really in everything we do, we try and take a holistic approach to that giant list I just rattled off for you.

Tanya Griffiths 3:51

Yeah, no. Thank you so much for sharing about that and really giving insight into how you approach career development, especially really specializing it for the individual in front of you and the person that you work with. It sounds like there's a lot of thought that goes into making it work for this person.

Jemma Spruston 4:15

We definitely try. That's definitely our aim. Is intentionality and really, yeah, treating, treating people in a way that is really humanizing, because we recognize that we are a system of sorts, and a lot of individuals that we work with have grown up in systems, whether that's the foster care system, the welfare system, the residential school system, all these different systems that can be very, very dehumanizing or very depersonalizing. And yeah, so our approach is yes, we are a system of sorts, in that we are, you know, this social services organization, but our goal and our aim, hopefully, is to provide, you know, a really personalized and empowering experience for people.

Tanya Griffiths 5:18

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think there is a lot of merit in looking at the systems that the individual is placed in as well or grew up with, or how their how their circumstances came to be, and if anything, it's it's so needed at this at this time, to really honor the lived experiences of another person.

Jemma Spruston 5:49

Absolutely, and I probably should clarify, I'm not trying to bash on, you know, the welfare system or the foster care system. You know, we need these systems. We have these systems, these social and government systems, in place for a reason. I'm not trying to totally erase their their validity or their their role, but yeah, yeah, there is, yeah, there is, as I mentioned, this depersonalization that that can easily, easily happen for people throughout their lives.

Tanya Griffiths 6:24

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Could you describe your journey from initiating music therapy at your organization, during your practicum, to your current role now as a career development advisor?

Jemma Spruston 6:38

Yeah. So it's a little abstract. I started as a music therapy student at UGM in September 2019, and that was a self initiated practicum, and I was there from September until April, my practicum ended. The pandemic was, you know, we were about a month into the pandemic at that point, and they were very short staffed. And I loved working at UGM and so I was told by one of my on site supervisors to apply for a case manager position that had opened up in the men's recovery program. Yeah. And he said, You know what? Just apply for it. And I was hesitant. I was skeptical. Oh, I'm sure there are a lot of people that would be more qualified for it, but he was, he was very encouraging. And so I, I applied for it, and I actually, as I clicked submit with my online application, I took a Snapchat video and I captioned it. Here goes nothing. Well, I was very wrong, because I got the case manager position, which was fantastic. And so I worked doing case management and music therapy in the men's recovery program from like after my practicum, until the summer of 2021 and at that point I transitioned into the career development counselor position, and I was career development counselor and music therapist, and in the specifically still in the men's recovery program, and then just in the last handful of months, our organization has gone through a restructuring, and so a new career development department was created, a standalone department, which was super exciting, and I was transferred to that. That

transfer happened in January, so I'm now in this advisor position. They just changed the title. However, I'm not currently doing music therapy, unfortunately, but yeah, that's how I got here.

Tanya Griffiths 9:13

Yeah, yeah. I think it's quite usual for organizations to go through a structural change, especially, you know, having the pandemic as well as part is, as part of your experience in the beginning.

Jemma Spruston 9:30

Absolutely, yeah, and the and the restructuring, of course, I think, I think is much needed because it's, it's, it's really been aimed at expansion and providing better services and providing more services, which, of course, is is much needed. And yeah, so, exciting changes.

Tanya Griffiths 9:54

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And even though you're you're not currently doing music therapy right now, in your experience, how does it complement or enhance traditional therapeutic approaches in addressing mental health and addiction issues?

Jemma Spruston 10:13

Okay, so I love nerding out about this. So if I start going too much on a tangent, please cut me off. Music therapy is completely unique to any other approach to wellness or any other health discipline that I'm aware of. It has a powerful way of providing a means of self expression, of creative exploration, social connection, Mind Body integration, mental health care and and it really you know, if we're looking at specifically focusing in on addiction, substance use disorders, gambling addiction, Those sorts of things, we have these classic models of addiction, the choice model of addiction is a choice you should just choose to stop drinking, which I don't think many people really believe anymore. And then, of course, there's the social learning model, which is, you know, addiction is a result of peer pressure and family circumstances, and it's, it's learned behavior from society, and the medical model, or the disease model of addiction, saying, No, it's about our biology and our genetic predispositions. And then, of course, the psychological model, which is saying, Oh, it's about our identity, our self esteem, our mental health, our coping mechanisms. And you know, when we actually in, in, in research and in and in, you know, developments in, in the field of mental health and addiction. You know, of course, we've

moved to this biopsychosocial model where it's saying all of the above in this kind of beautiful mix, and music therapy really speaks to each one of those components. Biologically speaking, music therapy helps with groundedness and connectedness to ourselves and our bodies and psychologically. Music therapy helps with emotional expression, with processing, you know, traumatic events, with reflecting and increasing our self awareness, our self regulation and and then socially, music therapy provides a means of connection, of healthy connection to other people and community building. And so it's very cool to to get to use music as a point of connection with people. I approach music therapy as music is something that we all connect to. And I'm I'm saying the word connect so much, I know, but you know, even, even the deaf and hard of hearing community is able to connect to music. And so every single person in this world is able to connect to a common thing that is music. And so if I can connect to music and you can connect to music, then through music, you and I are able to connect to each other in some capacity. And so music therapy, at least from my perspective, is really about using this common point of connection that we have to do all sorts of things together. And so specifically in the context of mental health and addiction, you can use music therapy in so many different ways. You know, songwriting provides a means of empowerment and self esteem. Building musical relaxation and mindfulness really helps with that. As I mentioned that mind body integration, becoming aware of our own bodies, coping skills, coping mechanisms, improvisation provides a way or a means for social interaction, for playfulness, for humor, for exploration and trying new things. Song sharing is a very social way of connecting to memories and connecting to other people. You know, when we pair music therapy with other modalities such as visual art or movement, there's, you know, home, other level or depth of richness that we can bring to it, and it's so much more. I could go on. As I said, this is, this is kind of where I nerd out a little bit, but, yeah, music therapy, it's not better than any other approach, but it, but it, it is. It is very unique in its approach. And so in my opinion, when we talk about holistic care and holistic wellness. Music therapy is an essential piece of that, because it brings something completely unique to the table. And yeah, it just, I love it, as you can probably tell, yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 15:37

Yeah, no, I absolutely hear the passion in your voice, and I really appreciate your emphasis on how it connects people, and it creates this common ground for people to be in another's presence, regardless of other factors, such as political views or or ethnicity or culture, and it really is just about how we connect over this one beautiful art and way of expression and the the almost, the magic that it brings um into people's lives, and what it also enhances too within that experience.

Jemma Spruston 16:31

Oh, absolutely. And I always, whenever people ask in a session, "what's the point of this?" Or in a genuinely curious way, yeah, most people that I work with have never heard of music therapy, and so they walk in and I say, "Hey, I'm a music therapist." And they look at me and they're like, "what is that? Explain yourself." Yeah, and I always say, my hope for our time together, whether it's an individual session or a group session, I always tell them, you know, my hope for our time together is that you experience a moment of connection, whatever that looks like connection to yourself, connection to your peers, connection to your body, connection to the world around you, connection to a spiritual entity, some sort of you know, faith element, connection to creativity, connection to memories, to tradition, to culture, to really anything, some point of connection during our time together, and especially in the mental health and addiction context, there's this addiction that are there's, there's a journalist and writer, Johann Hari, and he writes a lot about addiction, and he talks about how the opposite of addiction is connection. When we think about substance use and substance misuse and trauma and homelessness and poverty and displacement, and mental health conditions, those are all experiences that happen in isolation, and maybe not in literal, physical isolation. Sometimes, yes, but they all, they all happen in some sort of psychological and emotional and social isolation. And so of course, if those circumstances or those challenges are being experienced in isolation, then recovery and healing and reclamation of self happens in community. And so yeah, that's what I aim for. That's That's my hope.

Tanya Griffiths 19:05

Well, that was so beautiful. And that really, just like touched me the way you phrased that. Because I believe it too, and I see the hurt caused by marginalization, and I see the hurt of you know, the different impacts of polarization within our communities and societies. Absolutely and I and connection is definitely a word that comes to me when I think as well of the work that I want to do as I pursue my path of becoming a clinical counselor is more connection, is more connection within yourself, within what makes you feel closer to you or to your purpose, closer to your community and like the the healing that takes place really when, when we when we feel connected with others and with ourselves, just overall, the healing impacts of being in community and feeling cared for, of remembering what that feels like. So I'm definitely very moved with the way you phrase that.

Jemma Spruston 20:40

Thank you. Thank you. And, yeah, I agree. I think it's so great what you're doing counseling definitely is, is such a powerful way of providing those means of connection as well and go team.

Tanya Griffiths 20:57

Yeah, and the many ways that that can take form too, not just through talk, but through music too, and and movement. And, yeah, I'm a very big fan of somatic work. So that's I love, mind, body connection, breath connection, any of that it's just, it's incredible what happens when, when we see-

Jemma Spruston 21:27

Bagel Theory, anyone? I'm so sorry I interrupted.

Tanya Griffiths 21:32

No, no, no. I love that. Yes, and just the stories that we we hold unknowingly, because it's because, when we go through life in a very cognitive manner, we forget that we too have a body, and in our body lies our spirit and our stories, and in one way or another, they will demand to be felt.

Jemma Spruston 21:59

Right?

Announcement 22:01

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