

Marie Michelle Briere Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 67

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Noah Stolte 0:55

Hi, Marie Michelle, thanks for joining us on the VAMS podcast. It's really great to have you here today.

Marie Michelle Briere 1:00

Thanks for having me.

Noah Stolte 1:01

Yeah, it's awesome. I don't think at least while I've been interviewing, I don't think we've ever interviewed a rec therapist. So this will be enlightening.

Marie Michelle Briere 1:11

Oh, excellent. Well, I'm glad to be glad to be the first.

Noah Stolte 1:16

Great. Maybe we can start off by just, you can introduce yourself a little bit, tell us about yourself, sort of. I guess we can sort of get into rec therapy, but if you want to tell us about yourself first, that would be great.

Marie Michelle Briere 1:31

All right, so my name is Marie Michelle, and I am a recreation therapist at G.F. Stong Rehabilitation Centre here in Vancouver, beautiful British Columbia. And I have been doing this for about five years now. But a little bit about me, and I know we might go through this a little bit later, is I'm originally from Ontario. I did my undergrad at the University of Ottawa

in Health Sciences and Health Promotion, where I did not learn about rec therapy. At that point, I think I wanted to be an occupational therapist or a physio, but realized after a little while that I just wanted to be a little bit more. There was something missing, and I knew I always enjoyed being active. I knew I always enjoyed, you know, getting people ready to go traveling and I had to find a way to build that into that. And so when I found recreation therapy, it was, it was a little bit of an "aha" moment, yeah. And so finding that program out here in BC was, I think, that first kind of step into realizing that this is what I want to do as my career. And so again, thanks for having me today. And I look forward to I am stepping in a lot of very big shoes here. I've got some colleagues who worked with me who have worked at G.F. Strong for at least 25 plus years, and so I hope I do a service to all the hard work that they've also done.

Noah Stolte 1:35

I'm sure it'll be good, yeah, maybe then we can start off by just explaining a little bit more about what you do as a rec therapist. Because I think I know a little bit, but I definitely don't have a very strong grasp on the duties of a rec therapist.

Marie Michelle Briere 3:26

So recreation therapy, that's such a question that I think as a recreation therapist, I can speak for all of us. It's such a difficult question to answer, I think we dread it. But throughout our entire schooling, we were consistently told, "Find your elevator pitch. What is in you know, 10 seconds or less, what to you is recreation therapy." And so for me, really the nitty gritty of it is that recreation therapy is just being able to empower people to get back or return to something that they love doing, or perhaps discovering something new that will allow them to find joy in their lives again. You know, my role might look like identifying new activities to support confidence and getting out of their homes. Here in particular at G.F. Strong, we focus on all sorts of things, but things that we might look at is return to cycling or exploring adaptations for safe return to physical activities. It might be exploring social connections. Especially if somebody's been sick for a long time, or they have been feeling isolated. It's just kind of helping them find that spark, that little push to get them to help them find something that will they'll be enjoyable. But ultimately, I think the basic, the very big definition is that we use a systematic process that uses recreation and leisure based activities to address individual needs, as a means to improve psychological, physical, emotional, well-being.

Noah Stolte 5:19

Yeah, that's the therapist side of it, eh?

Marie Michelle Briere 5:22

Exactly, yeah, if you want the exact definition that will ultimately also encompass, you know, the various populations that we work with, is that we have, you know, five areas, really, that we work in or we call them the SPECS. So, S, P, E, C, S, which the textbook is, social, physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual.

Noah Stolte 5:56

Oh, cool.

Marie Michelle Briere 5:57

So yeah. So those are all areas that recreation therapists can help their clients explore, improve, address, to access their community, access resources, or just improve overall well-being.

Noah Stolte 6:13

So yeah, I guess you probably have partnered with a lot of the Disability Foundation organizations over the years, then.

Marie Michelle Briere 6:21

Have we ever, oh my gosh. The Disability Foundation of BC is such a great organization, and our clients have benefited from their programs since I can remember. Yeah, it's been a pleasure getting to just to see the difference and the impact that some of these programs do for clients out in the community.

Noah Stolte 6:46

Totally, yeah. I mean, working at VAMS, I've definitely seen that.

Marie Michelle Briere 6:50

Oh yeah, you guys have such a great environment.

Noah Stolte 6:52

Our little basement studio. What was the main reason that you started doing it? I know you somewhat touched on it, but maybe coupled with your interests as well as your schooling, could you maybe tell us why you ultimately decided that this was the right path for you?

Marie Michelle Briere 7:13

Yeah, so recreation therapy, I think, is never a straight and narrow path for a lot of people. We often discover it through something else. And so for me, that was exactly that. I

completed my degree at the University of Ottawa, and didn't quite know what I wanted to do with it. When you come out of Health Sciences, there's so many different ways that you can that you can go about, you know, continuing that that pathway, and at the time, I still really wasn't sure. I spent most of my university free time either camping with friends, I was working in an outdoor kind of retail shop and for some reason, there was something about that where I was able to take my knowledge of the benefits of various of being able to move and like you learned a lot in health sciences about just the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. And so when I was working in a place where I was encouraging people to have good fitting packs when they're going traveling and hiking, and the importance of a good shoe and I was like, "There's something about this." I'm teaching people how to enjoy their leisure, how to make sure they have an enjoyable time out there. I was like, "There's got to be something like this." And it was when I was reading some of the questions that you were sending out, I realized this was this was my calling from the beginning, I just didn't know. And I was trying to find a way to implement those things I enjoy—helping people find happiness, find passions, find meaning in the things that they're doing and having a good experience doing so—and so when I was done university, I started volunteering at different things. I volunteered with a physio. But what really ended up being the final call for me for rec therapy was I found a volunteer position in a local, in Ottawa, at the Royal Ottawa Hospital for mental health, and I was introduced to the recreation therapist there, and I was just like, "What? What is that I've just done five years of school that I have never heard of a recreation therapist?" And she was working with a geriatric psychiatry population, which is, you know, quite difficult, but the joy that you could see in some of these folks, just being able to engage in something and having a conversation with somebody, and just experiencing some kind of like a normal everyday activity, was so eye-opening, yeah, and I thought, "Well, where else. What other populations do these folks work with?" And after doing a little bit of diving into the topic, I realized that there was a program in Vancouver or in BC through Douglas College. And it was so quick. I quit my job. I packed my things, I said goodbye to my family, and you know, they supported me wholeheartedly in this, and I started my pathway into recreation therapy, amazing, you know, I grew up playing hockey and being into sports and so having the choice of knowing that there were certain leisure activities available to me was always so important, right? And so, yeah, I think recreation therapy was just that stepping stone to being able to take everything that was important, just knowing that leisure and recreation is such an important part to our well-being. So yeah, over the moon when I found out it was actually a job.

Noah Stolte 11:07

Yeah, yeah.

Marie Michelle Briere 11:09

I think that answers the question.

Noah Stolte 11:10

Totally. And maybe you could talk a little bit about the clients and people that you see and help, and what are the challenges that some of them face, and how have you seen recreation sort of help them out.

Marie Michelle Briere 11:25

Okay, a question within a question within a question. [Laughs]

Noah Stolte 11:28

Yeah, maybe let's just start with the first one.

Marie Michelle Briere 11:31

I see where that goes. So let's just start with who I work with. So I work with two different folks. Again, my I've been a CTRS, is the certification that we get at the end of our program, and so I've been a certified recreation therapist or therapeutic recreation specialist since 2019. So it's not been that long, but I've had the chance to work with a few populations so far. I started off in a lovely facility for young adults with mental health and complex health care needs. And so that was a really interesting population to work with.

Noah Stolte 12:20

That sounds challenging.

Marie Michelle Briere 12:21

Very challenging, but also so rewarding, because they create their own little community in there. And ultimately, being able to provide opportunities for emotional expression, for positive emotional expression, for community integration, right, getting people out and making sure that some of those needs are met, being able to chat with them and kind of understand their needs and wants was, was really interesting. And then later, I ended up working at G.F. Strong, which was, I think, ultimately, one of my dream spots to work. And I started off with an adolescent and young adult population, which in terms of, you know, challenges that they face, it was anything from concussion to acquired brain injury to spinal cord injury, neurocognitive, or neuromuscular, we really saw a little bit of everyone. And I think some of the challenges that our young adults have is there's not a lot of supports for young adults with disabilities out in the community. Or, you know, I find so that was always something that was a bit challenging, was trying to find a place for them

where they could feel comfortable chatting with others about their experiences. And it's not to say that people need to find activities that they can do with other people with disabilities, I think it's actually quite important to advocate and normalize inclusive leisure across our community.

Noah Stolte 14:05

Totally.

Marie Michelle Briere 14:05

But it can just be difficult for them, because their peers are just so, sometimes they've grown up with this disability, and, you know, their peers have gone different ways, and so they find themselves quite socially isolated by a certain time in their life. So that was a big barrier and a big piece to kind of work with them.

Noah Stolte 14:25

Yeah, I can imagine that would be especially challenging for a younger kid or, yeah, or even, like teenagers especially, too, struggle a lot with that already as it is. So I can imagine that would be a pretty delicate situation.

Marie Michelle Briere 14:39

Yeah, sometimes it's already a time in our lives where we can feel quite alone in some of the problems that we face, you know, no matter how trivial. And sometimes it, yeah, a lot of them, you know, they start off at Sunny Hill [Health Centre], or they start off with the kids services, and they get tons of support, and then suddenly they grow out of the system or they grew out of the supports provided for kids and they're kind of left facing a lot of this stuff alone, and that's a really tough part. And so a lot of the work that the team at G.F. Strong, or those working with adolescent and young adults, is just trying to find an advocate for more supports as they kind of transition out of those services.

Noah Stolte 15:26

Yeah, right? Anyway, sorry, what were you gonna say?

Marie Michelle Briere 15:27

No, no, yeah. So it's like, it's a big piece that's lacking in just those supports that as you transition or age out of something, it's just suddenly you're kind of left with nothing. And sometimes there's, you know, it's a little bit of a shock to the system for them.

Noah Stolte 15:46

Yeah, I actually have some experience with that, because I've actually dealt with childhood cancer. And the difference between the BC Children's Hospital and the rest of the hospital system is very different. And it's like, luckily, I sort of was fine by the time I was 18, but I know some people who have just had their sort of treatment split in between the two facilities. And it's like, it's very shocking, very shocking.

Marie Michelle Briere 16:17

It's very shocking. You're changing your team that maybe you've had for a very long time and, like, that's a huge thing to go through as a teenager, right? Like, I don't know exactly how long of that period of time was for you, but that's a tough thing to go through in that period when there's so many milestones, things that you want to do with your friends, and you might not be feeling good, you're kind of feeling left out and, like, how do you manage those things? It's very isolating for teenagers to go through that.

Noah Stolte 16:50

Yeah, no, I just have a bit of an insight into that. So that's cool.

Marie Michelle Briere 16:54

Yeah, absolutely.