

# A Bit of Me

*This series of profiles on SUNY Broome community members is a part of the Student Village diversity calendar initiative. We will be highlighting members in our community who identify with or can speak on the diversity theme or topic for each month.*

*The theme for April is Culture and the topic is Do we interpret other people's behaviors through our own?*

*To be featured in this series please reach out to Kalis Nunes .*

## Melissa Martin

Counselor/Chair of Counseling Services



### WHAT IS YOUR EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND?

I graduated from The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) in 1998 with a 4 year bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts and then graduated in 2001 with a Master's in Social Work (MSW) from New York University (NYU)

### WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS PROFESSION?

To be honest, I truly believe that the profession chose me. I intended to obtain a degree in Education from Penn State and had dreams of teaching first grade. That changed two years into college when I realized that teaching was not something that I saw myself doing for the next 30 plus years. Frankly, standing in front of a classroom day in and day out bored me. I was kind of at a crossroads in my life, clueless as to what I truly felt passionate about and what I could see myself doing. I decided to fall back on my minor- which was Psychology and see where it took me. I knew I wanted to work with people and help in some way- I just didn't know how. After I graduated I really did not know what direction to head in- Psychology and become a Psychologist or head down another route? I knew I needed to return to school and do something. I really had no clue. I stumbled upon Social Work as I talked to friends and family and it just kinda fit me. I am not one to be boxed in- I need a job, profession and career path that is not limiting and where I may be creative and have some freedoms of service delivery to my clients. Social Work has proven to be a perfect fit for me in being able to help those in need and be creative in the process. My role at SUNY Broome has afforded me the opportunity to not only do social work, but to teach as well. I love the combination of both!

### WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE YOUR BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT? WHY?

I would have to say- simply enough- my life. I know to some that may sound a bit much, but I mean it wholeheartedly. I am a pretty goal oriented person and consistently challenge myself to reach new levels. I do not accept failure to be an option for me and will continue to strive for what I want even when knocked down. I feel that an outcome of this is that all areas of my life have big accomplishments and there's not one that stands out more than others. I have ran a marathon and several half-marathons after hating running for most of my life, I am raising two amazingly wonderful and well- rounded children, I have an exciting job and have had some really fabulous career opportunities like achieving the Chancellor's Award for Professional Excellence in 2019. These are examples from my personal life, my family life and my career path and are



all accomplishments that make me happy and push me to do more.

### **WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING TO DO IN BROOME COUNTY IN YOUR FREE TIME?**

Broome County is not home to me, but when I am here I love to do all the things. I really love to explore the latest restaurants and local establishments with friends and family. I love to be outdoors and take advantage of the area parks to hike and walk in. I enjoy artsy things- shows, painting classes, First Fridays and such. I am pretty much open to anything and will try new things.

### **WHO DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE YOUR MENTOR(S)? WHY?**

I really define a mentor as someone who has had the ability to see in me what I cannot see in myself and who gently, or not so gently, pushes me to live up to my greatest potential; and as a bonus, is skilled in such a way to have me believe in myself the way that they do. Outside of my family, I have been fortunate to have several people in my life who live up to this definition. My High School Art teacher and friend is probably one of my earliest mentors that had a lasting impact on my life and the way that I view myself. She was tough and yet exactly what I needed to push myself in my art studies. In graduate school I would have to say that the Dean of our MSW program had a major impact in my life- I can still hear her voice to this day. She saw in me something that I now- 20 years later- believe in, but then had no insight into then. If it was not for her I may have left NYU at the time and wandered a bit aimlessly. And lastly, over the last 16 years my boss, turned friend, turned co-worker, Mary Whittaker has been the greatest mentor. She has this uncanny ability to throw the most ridiculous ideas out to me and they stick, I do them and I survive. Ideas that I could never see myself doing or thinking that I wanted to do, but somehow she can.

### **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN OR IS CURRENTLY BEING NEGATIVELY STEREOTYPED?**

Before I begin answering the next series of questions, I think that it is important to define the scope through which I will talk about stereotypes and stereotyping. This is a broad topic and there are many, many facets to discussing stereotyping. I am one of the Mental Health Professionals on campus and we work with students who share very intimate and personal stories, some concerning stereotyping that they have faced. These

conversations are only made possible as a result of these students breaking through the stigma that is attached to reaching out for mental health services. I can speak most effectively about stereotypes, stigma and how it relates to mental wellness.

I think it is fair to say that where there is stereotyping, there is often stigma. When a person is labeled (stereotyped) they are set apart from others and placed into a group of generalized beliefs that society places on them. Stereotypes are perceived thoughts, opinions and beliefs, etc. about different cultures, races and ethnicities. As a result, of such stereotypes there may be stigma, which is the mark of disgrace that has been placed upon them and sets them apart from others.



In looking at stereotypes only through the lens of the stigma attached as it relates to the work I do with individuals and their mental wellness I do not have one particular thing that I would say to students who are being or have been negatively stereotyped, but I do offer support and space to share their stories judgment free. I believe this to be the most important thing that I can offer any student in this situation. For a person to be heard and valued in sharing this kind of vulnerability is truly a gift and I try to create an atmosphere in my individual work with students where they may feel supported and safe to share.

### **DO YOU THINK THAT BETTER REPRESENTATION CAN HELP FIGHT AGAINST STEREOTYPES?**

If we look at stereotypes in relation to stigma and what I see in the mental health world, yes. I believe that more can be done to reduce the stigma around accessing mental health services and having mental health issues. We have a long way to go- this begins from the top down, as well as the bottom up. Messages we receive as we are growing up among our families, peers and the media impact how we view ourselves and those different from us, leading to stereotyping and adding to any stigma. Breaking through some of these messages can have a great impact on the reduction of stereotyping in our society. We have a responsibility to create a culture that fosters mutual respect for differences in others, a culture that is safe for all.

### **CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF A TIME WHERE YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW WAS STEREOTYPED UNINTENTIONALLY?**

I think back to when I was preparing to apply to college. I was in high school- I was not the strongest student, academically speaking, my interests were all over the place as was my confidence in my abilities. My parents hold traditional gender role jobs (my dad in construction and my mom a teacher) and they grew up in a time when females who went to college went to be teachers, nurses or secretaries. My mom was very matter of fact with me as she helped me to figure out what I wanted to study and reminded me of these being her only options when she was heading off to college. She recognized that my generation of females had so many more opportunities and paths to go down. She encouraged me to follow my heart and also noted that it was unfamiliar territory for her to lead me through. And as much as she said this, she also told me that I could easily attend cosmetology school and be just fine. Yup, cosmetology school and not because I had a passion for doing hair, skin and/or nails, but simply because I was a female and this fit the role. Ummm yeah- that was a hard no. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a career in cosmetology, but I firmly believe that you have to have some interest and/or passion to do such and I did not have either. She meant no harm in this, but still, it stood out as something rather stereotypical in nature.

### **HOW BIG OF AN IMPACT CAN STEREOTYPING HAVE ON A PERSON?**

I do not think that we ever know how big of an impact that stereotyping has on an individual. Due to such secrecy, privacy, shame and guilt amongst other emotions and feelings, as well as these labels being internalized, as a result of a person being stereotyped,

people don't often speak of this. And, to determine what impact such actions have on a person is up to that person feeling comfortable and safe to disclose and discuss this with another.