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**Peter** [00:00:01] From the University of Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork Podcast. I'm Peter Sobota. Good to have you along, everybody. Social work and Clinical Settings. Blue and Red Communities. School Districts. Policy Writing and Advocacy. Universities and at the family dinner table. All of these and more put the significant polarization of our values, politics, and fears in high relief. Historically, social work has seen itself as primarily a progressive profession that challenges the status quo and is particularly aligned with vulnerable and oppressed groups of people. It has values and ethics that promote empowerment of these groups, along with the dignity and worth of all people. Social justice and racial justice. And informs us not to collaborate with any form of discrimination. And finally, throw in a healthy mix of ethical responsibilities to the broader society. That is a pretty complicated playing field for social work, students, practitioners and academics. So how can social workers think about and operate in a future that expresses and aligns with our values and ethics, especially in more conservative spaces? On today's show, Dr. Meredith Tetloff will give us a glimpse. She will speak about how we can notice the signals inherent as we move through the world and talk about how to devise scenarios to be used as tools to envision and create futures that align with social work values and ethics. Mostly, she'll tell us about Alabama, her adopted home, and how we can see Alabama as a harbinger of things to come. Some things concerning and others encouraging. Yeah, by all means we will look to Alabama for signals and the ways forward in places that seem impossible. Meredith Tetloff, Ph.D., is associate professor of social work at the University of Montevallo in Shelby County, Alabama, where she teaches and pursues her scholarly research interest in community practice interventions. Recently with a focus on university community partnerships. Hi Meredith. Welcome to inSocial Work. I've been looking forward to this conversation.

**Meredith** [00:02:26] Hey, Peter. Me too. I really appreciate y'all reaching out and providing this opportunity to talk about some of these issues that are really overwhelming some of us.

**Peter** [00:02:38] Well, let's see what we can do with that. I think that's you know, that's why we wanted to talk with you. So. But before we get into our topic for today, I've kind of made it a habit of just asking all of our guests, especially those, we don't always have social workers on, but especially the social workers. And I'm going to ask you this, too, and and to talk about it relatively briefly. I know it's a longer story, but, you know, we got to pay attention to time here. But I always ask guests, I'm curious, how did you end up in social work? You know, Capital S capital W And then how did you become interested in our topic today, which is, you know, conservatism and how to be a social worker in a place that's dominated by that. So you want to take a crack at that?

**Meredith** [00:03:29] Yeah, I'll and I'll try to keep it brief, it's certainly a question friends and family have asked me throughout the years, so you'd think I'd have an answer pretty handy, but I came in a kind of a roundabout way. My undergraduate experience was in Birmingham, Alabama, at a small school. Birmingham, Southern and Birmingham did not have a undergraduate degree in social work, and honestly, I didn't really know what social work was at the time. I wasn't fully aware of it as an option. I think we as a profession have some PR to do around that, but I was really drawn to political science and so I got to graduate my undergrad in political science and my school had a very robust service learning program. So while I'm getting this degree in political science, I'm spending time in

the community. It's mostly in charity driven initiatives like soup kitchens or volunteering at schools. And I start to become really frustrated with this disconnect between the prevalence of the problems that require charity and seeing a lot of systemic roots. Right to what you know, we're responding to the symptoms, not the causes. And I wasn't quite sure what to do with that. Like all political science majors, I enrolled in law school, but I dropped out. And then I spent a year doing...

**Peter** [00:04:52] Is that what happens to all political science...

**Meredith** [00:04:54] It's quite a pretty frequent thing if you're if you don't know what to do with the political science major. That seems to. The decision to go ahead and do law school. Thankfully, I didn't didn't go down that road too far. But I did a year of AmeriCorps, which really sort of further exposed me to social services and nonprofits and found out about this amazing social work profession that I could get paid more than my whatever, \$9,000 and, you know, annually that I was making in AmeriCorps to do this work and went back and got my MSW and ended up in New York City, my first time and only time living outside the cell and enjoyed studying.

**Peter** [00:05:38] Before you went bigger. Went home, right?

**Meredith** [00:05:41] That's right.

**Peter** [00:05:41] Good for you. Yeah.

**Meredith** [00:05:43] Well, I had a fabulous mentor who said, you know, grad school is a great time to really put yourself outside your comfort. You know, try a new place, try new geography. And enjoyed it. Discovered. I love visiting New York. I do not like living there, but it was a good experience and I chose the school I went to, which is Columbia, because it had a policy concentration. So I'm still drawn to this intersection of legislation and policy and social work. Again, kind of thinking about the systems that seem to create and maintain our social problems. My internships there were kind of reminding me of service learning and that there was a lot of sort of white savior approaches to it, a very sort of top down way of trying to solve problems that didn't often center people who were directly impacted by that. And so it just further confirmed for me that I didn't want to work for a big, large institution. You know, I kind of I wanted to be in the community and was able to get a really wonderful job. And Elana, working with youth and it was very youth driven and youth centered, did that for a few years, loved it. But then I had a kid and the schedule was very, very challenging. It's a lot of late evenings and weekends, so the allure of the city got me to where I am now. So I went back to University of Georgia, got my seat and studied. How do local community communities really collaborate and come together to solve problems at that local level? And then now I'm at University of Montebello, and I love it. It's just it's a dream job and it's a public liberal arts school. So I get to really work closely with students and still get to spend a lot of time in the community.

**Peter** [00:07:35] Yeah. And that also, even without you saying it currently, I think explains social work in a conservative perhaps environment.

**Meredith** [00:07:45] Yeah. You know, I grew up in Florida and the Panhandle. And again, other than my brief time in New York, I've always lived in the South. And it's where my family and a lot of my I'm very, very rich social network. And most of it's in the South. I love the South. And I know we'll get into this more and it has its challenges and I can talk about that quite a bit. But no, I knew I wanted to be here and wanted to find a way to do the

social work stuff in an environment that, for better or for worse, really, really has a high need for social workers. And I think our presence here is essential and important, impactful. So at least that's how we try to think of it.

**Peter** [00:08:30] So for listeners, we are recording it's late October, I think it's the 25th of 2024, and we're not going to release this podcast until probably the third week of November. And that's going to be, of course, after the the general election. You might have heard about it. And as of today, it's pretty much anybody's guess what the outcome will be. But I think what we can say, you know, pretty confidently is that maybe about half, perhaps even more of at least our voting population is or seems to be or is supportive of a leadership empowered power held by very conservative or in some cases, here's where I get in trouble authoritarian candidates. So if you buy all of that, which is me, not Meredith's talking here, that's Peter Szabo to talking. If you buy on that, let me just leave this right next to it. Social work sees itself as a primarily progressive profession on paper built to challenge the status quo, and particularly is aligned with vulnerable and oppressed groups of people. We have values and ethics that promote empowerment of those groups along with the dignity. And worth of all people and social and racial justice and implores us not to collaborate with any form of discrimination. And then finally, you know, throw in a little ethical mix of a mix of ethical responsibilities to a broader society. And so Meredith makes me laugh. Yeah. Everybody breathe. We are counting on you to help us navigate the way forward. I'm partially teasing. So I'm curious. What do you think about that conceptualization? And and you feel free to take that in whatever direction you want to or tell me to move on that button.

**Meredith** [00:10:45] So, yeah, I know it feels very real. You know, I spend most of my time with social work students, so these are future social workers. And I think they are especially feeling overwhelmed by this political season in this election. And it's on top of all of their other daily challenges and things they have to do. And so it's been interesting. I think the classroom has provided a nice space for the students and I to process a lot of this, particularly that we live in a very conservative state. There's no doubt that our state is going to vote for Trump. And so how do you practice and be a social worker in that environment? And, you know, we spend a lot of time looking at our code and our values, and we read policy statements and we look at calls to advocacy. It doesn't take a lot of time before you realize social work is a progressive profession. We're nonpartisan, but we tend to align with policies. Although I will say both political parties have a lot to be critiqued. And so it can be really hard. And, you know, the thing that you said that really kind of sticks with me is this idea of like, do we have this ethical mandate not to collaborate with any form of discrimination? And I don't know how any social worker is currently doing that. I just feel like discrimination to some extent is so embedded, even social work itself. Right. We're having these debates looking at licensure pass rates. Is our profession guilty of creating and or at least amplifying discrimination and disparities? You know, our roles in systems like prisons and child welfare and, you know, different conversation for different day. But it's a pretty big mandate for us to come to. And so to me, what's kind of works for me in the students and I don't know how well it's worked, but what we've been trying is to really understand what are people's realities. So for that half of the population that are leaning towards perhaps authoritarian or the very least very conservative policies. Where is that coming from? Kind of what's driving that need. And in my experience, I think a lot of people just feel really insecure about their well-being and their futures for very good reason. Housing is a mess. Child care is a mess. Health care, education, Higher access to ed. And every single one of my students has to work while they are going to school. And so the reality is for people, it's really difficult. And I think it becomes tempting and easy, particularly by the party that's not in power, to aggravate those concerns and fears, to

blame the government. So the party in power always sort of gets held accountable, right, for the current circumstances. And so understanding, you know, I think for social workers, that's actually a call to action and an invitation. These are our same concerns. We are also worried about economic stability and access to health care and child care. And so it's a place where perhaps common ground exists. You know, I try not to be too naive about it. And the huge, huge, I think, piece to it and this is something we talk a lot about in my class, particularly the legacy of living in the South is the impact of racism. And understanding, you know, since before the founding of the United States, how race has been used as a divisive issue, how the government and other institutions created laws and policies explicitly to divide people by race, to kind of undermine any socioeconomic coalition. And the use of violence, you know, 250 years of violence and enslavement, another hundred years of living under Plessy Ferguson with Jim Crow and black hopes, that has a profound impact on where we are today. And I think there's a lot you know, I live in a. Eight, where we have high rates of poverty. Most people who are poor or white, they often vote against things that I feel would actually be in their best interest. Yeah. And understanding why that is and the power of that narrative of racial hierarchy. And Heather McGhee talks a lot about this in her wonderful book, *The Sum of Us*, this idea of a zero sum mentality. Right. If others get something, then that means I lose. And it can be very powerful. And so, you know, and I think about that and kind of think about, okay, where do we have common grounds? I feel fairly, I guess, maybe optimistic in the beginning, research related to deep canvassing. And so. Right. And if you're not familiar, deep canvassing is an old school strategy. It's so social work, right? It's going and knocking on people's doors and just asking them open ended questions about topics and their positions and why they believe it. It's sharing your own personal experiences. It's listening. It uses techniques we might find familiar from counseling or motivational interviewing. Like how do you get people to work through cognitive dissonance of I oppose this policy, but that makes me intolerant. And the research shows it can be effective at helping people open their minds. And for me, thinking about, okay, how do we really utilize this power bloc like the Poor People's Campaign is a great example. Doing advocacy. Hey, we if all the poor people in the United States were able to unite around some economic agenda, that would be a powerful voting constituency, I don't think we would see either political party as they exist today. Yeah. And so, you know, I think it's the hard, slow, patient work of talking and listening and empathy. And I say that as a person with a great deal of privilege. I'm white, cisgender, straight. I have an income that puts me above the median income of my state. I have access to health care. All of those things make some of these potential policies less of a threat to me. But recognizing this, I have some privilege in those spaces, so I might have more time to develop empathy and listen and talk. But I really think that's where we start. And and again, trying not to be naive or Pollyanna that we all have things and we all want safe communities. We all want economic opportunities. We all want our kids to have good futures. If we can start there, some of those divisions, they don't necessarily go away, but we might find a place of common ground, particularly around policies that the provide economic opportunity or access to health care or subsidized child care, all of the sort of basic needs that we need.

**Peter** [00:18:21] Well, I think you you covered the playing field very well there. And so and this is really why we we chase you, Meredith, is because we. We thought that you had a way forward that we wanted to learn more about. And we actually wanted to get the word out about it. So let's let's give this challenge a whirl, you know, like, what is the way forward? So again, we ask you to talk with us, especially now because we thought your thinking was pretty creative about these challenges. And so here you, as you know, are futurist. And so I think that's an interesting place to start. What is that? Yeah. And what

does it mean to be a social work futurist or a futurist social worker? I mean, I you know, I hope that doesn't sound silly, but it's quite everyone I know.

**Meredith** [00:19:18] Absolutely. And I would say I probably identify as a social worker who's learning about good foresight and futurist thinking. This is still relatively new to me. It's very fun and very exciting and it is so relevant and I want more social workers to know about it. I have to start with a massive shout out to Laura Anderson at Portland State. She's a social worker who's been doing this work for many years. And, you know, her excitement about it led her to think, I need more social workers doing this. And so she created a social work health futures lab. And we've been meeting and talking and thinking. And that's a lot of what futurists imagination and thinking and creative spaces. And she has carved out this just really wonderful collaboration. And across both the United States and Canada, our lab is represented in both places around what future says. Is it sort of ask this question, right? Like what is the future we want and how do we start today to prepare for it? And I think this is incredibly relevant to social work because we tend to respond to crisis and trauma. Social work tends to be a reactive profession and that can feel overwhelming. People get burnt out. We have high turnover in jobs. People feel rightfully so, unsupported and overwhelmed. You know, when you are responding to the crisis and the symptoms again, after a while, that is too much and future's thinking gives us a chance to be a little more proactive about it and to think through, okay, so these are our problems are having today. What's the future we want? And Gore points out, no social movement has ever been started or existed or succeeded without first imagining a better future. You have to think about where you want to go and what you want to be. Now we talk about futures and the plural. There's many possibilities or so many perspectives. Future thinking within social work ideally would be incredibly democratic. Lots of choices included in those conversations. It's not about predicting we can't, but it's about anticipating, anticipating, planning, strategizing, and again, seeing ourselves as people with power and agency like things we can do today. So that tenure and, you know, futures thinking is really thinking it like ten years or so in the future. So it's not just next week or next year, but really. Social change takes a very long time. And we know that. And, you know, you have to be really patient with it, but really keeping your eye on that long term vision and that long term goal. And so it's something all social workers, whether or not they're aware of it, are grappling with. I spend my time with future social workers. These are students who are going to be teaching or practicing social work for decades and teaching. Maybe they might be teaching. I hope. I hope some of them do. I really they teach, you know, teach us all a lot. So thinking what are those challenges that we can't even imagine today? And we did one of the activities we did in the lab, just to kind of give you some examples of this, is we did a jam board where we all just sort of brainstormed what were the the some of the future challenges to ethics and social work. We all know as social workers, ethics is a constantly evolving conversation, constantly being challenged. And some of the things that the the members and the lab came up with this idea of can we even coexist in the same profession? Are we are some of these debates and social work leading us down very divergent paths? Will social work exist as a profession in the future? There's been some interesting pieces written about the end of social work. What is our role in systems of oppression and both having responsibility in creating and maintaining and sustaining harms to people. What about our own mental health and well-being? And I know that the Campaign for Social Work Equity is looking at the code of ethics as a way to okay, we need to build in there stuff that actually protects ourselves as well. What about social workers discomfort with direct action? So we don't know the outcome of the election. I suspect either way, we're going to see some direct action responses. Where? Well, I.

**Peter** [00:24:16] Would think so.

**Meredith** [00:24:17] Yeah. Right. Yeah. And I'm trying not to.

**Peter** [00:24:19] Give up when people talk about, I can't wait for it to be over.

**Meredith** [00:24:23] Gosh, I'm worried about the week that it's got to go. And yes, I have friends who were asking if you were going to cancel class the day after the election. It's like, no, no, no. I don't think we'll probably know the day after the election. But also, you know, the world goes on. But, you know, where will social workers be and those direct action campaigns. And so it's in, you know, with technology and climate change and economic inequality and an unsustainable health care system. Huge problems are coming at us very quickly. And so rather than being in that position of reacting and having to deal with it on our heels, futurist thinking encourages us to really take a role in envisioning, imagining and shaping what the world could or would look like. It can be scary and it's a vulnerable place to be. But I think it's the first step. It's a skill that we have to do. It's also really fun. Foresight and futures. Thinking is a lot of games and activity and you can Google it and find a whole bunch of them there. I use them in my classroom. Students love it. It's just, you know, it gives you a space to really do some of that reflective work that a social workers were supposed to do and don't always have time to do.

**Peter** [00:25:54] Yeah, and what I really like about it is, in addition to all the things that you said about future thinking, futures thinking it's for especially for people like social workers. How are we going to do all that in accordance with our values and our our mission? And and that's challenging. I mean, we're going to get to that, probably. But so, you know, when when, when, when I was still trying to talk you into this, I think we chatted very briefly about signals, which I confess were not on my radar. I mean, I know what signals are, but not signals in the way that you are talking about them. And I think futurists are talking about it. So could you give us maybe eye for a guide? I hope I'm not the only one, but you give us signals. 101.

**Meredith** [00:26:59] So I well, and again, I am 100% just borrowing from other experts and people who've spent many years and have enormous insight and wisdom. And I'm leaning largely on Jane McGonigal. And I cannot recommend her book enough. She has a book called Imaginable How to See the Future Coming and Feel Ready for Anything, even things that Seem impossible today. And Jane also works for the Institute for the Future, which is an organization in California that partnered with our social work lab and signals. And I was unaware of what signals what we actually all know signals. They just were called. Yeah, exactly right. They're clues. So they are concrete, specific things that are happening right now. That might be uncommon or unique, but give us some kind of clue or insight or story about what the future could be. So it's something that's happening now that might become more widespread in the future. And so, you know, future thinking is not about predicting, but we have information out there. We have trends and data and, you know, social action and things that are happening that can become clues as to what is possible in the future. For better or for worse. Right. What's possible that we want or that we don't want. And so that's what signals are. It encourages you to think about what are you observing today that is is challenging your conception of the future. I personally find most of my signals and the news, you know, I try to read a fair amount of local news, which is really important and interesting and challenging. Sometimes local news has a hard time right now, but national news.

**Peter** [00:28:56] This local news still exists.

**Meredith** [00:28:58] I know it does, as a matter of fact. I'm going to reference a couple of our local journalists who both both of whom have won Pulitzers that work for the Alabama media group for AL.com and do a fantastic job. They've had a real they've done investigative journalism that's had this huge impact. It's Kyle Whitmire and John Archibald. And they have coined the phrase Alabama ification.

**Peter** [00:29:23] We're going to get to that. I can't wait. Yeah.

**Meredith** [00:29:25] Yeah. But local journalism, not I know it's struggling, but there's signs of it. Signals. Signals. For example, both of them winning these Pulitzers right there from their reporting on local injustices and towns in Alabama and gaining national attention and recognition for that. So perhaps that's a signal that local journalism that's might be the role of local journalism in the future, or what is it that sustaining it, what is it that is making that necessary in those communities? So that's what this thing all is. It's just it can be technology. If you are in higher education as a student or a teacher, there's no way you're not talking about A.I. right now.

**Peter** [00:30:14] And accessibility. Yes. Wow. Yeah. Yeah.

**Meredith** [00:30:18] Yeah. Yep. So they're all over for us, you know? Think about social workers that are going into direct practice that might be going into therapy or counseling. What is the role of technology in that? We saw, obviously, during kind of the peak of the pandemic, we saw this huge rapid expansion of telehealth. And that's really interesting to me. I live in a rural area. We have a massive shortage of mental health practitioners. We have folks that live in our communities that lack transportation or might have mobility limitations. This is very exciting. It has this increased accessibility, but it comes with its own bag of worries in terms of privacy and ethics. Do we want an A.I. bots providing our therapy? You know, people have already tried this. People have approached A.I. with questions related to their mental health. So whether or not we social workers want it, it's there and it's coming in in a lot of these places. It's coming faster than we want. Certainly with climate change, there's no shortage of looking at the the changes and the impact of natural disasters. So I grew up in Florida. Hurricanes were a way of life. We expected them. They still devastate Florida a lot. But if you look at what happened in North Carolina with Hurricane Helene, you know, one of the things that I've been reading and hearing about from folks that live there is the way that hurricane. It wasn't a it wasn't the way hurricanes impact Florida. It was a lot more flooding. Big storms that stay longer, that drop a lot more water. And North Carolina doesn't have the infrastructure built the way before. But so important, you have to build things to be sustained in a hurricane. You don't in North Carolina. But now you probably do. So, you know, places are not immune to that. This is a pretty compelling, you know, worrisome signal around, you know, that we are not ready for this. So it's not the signals. It's just, you know, it can be a fun and interesting way to pay attention to this. It's fun to share signals with other people. That's one of the things I'd like to do is ask my students to think of signals and to bring them to class and just exchange them and kind of talk about them. And then you ask and these are Jane's questions. You ask, why is this happening? What's driving it? What do I worry about? Or what excites me about it? What would it be like if this were more common, if this became the norm? Right. How would our worlds be? Is that a world I want to be in? Is this a signal that I want to invest in and amplify, or is this a signal that might be a warning sign for things to come?

**Peter** [00:33:12] That was that was wonderful. I know before you just said all that I was going to just because I tend to, like, gravitate toward the extreme practicality of things. So I

was going to ask you, so how would a social worker or anybody who cares, for that matter, use signals? And you just laid it out. And that's a much more proactive approach rather than reactive that you that you mentioned earlier. So that makes perfect sense. So right before we began the podcast, I was I was closing up my browsers to make room for for this. And I and I saw that The Washington Post is not going to endorse a candidate for president this year. Wow. Is is that a signal?

**Meredith** [00:33:55] I think so. Yeah, I think so. I don't know what it's a signal of. I would want to sit on that for a minute. And I've been reading some of the discussions related to that. I know there's a lot of people that are unhappy with the.

**Peter** [00:34:10] I was reading the backlash. Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

**Meredith** [00:34:15] But I think it probably indicates something about the role of journalism, perhaps the fear of journalists, and particularly some of our most esteemed, you know, journalism institutions around being accused of partizanship. Yeah, I you know, my gut is that's a worrisome signal. And that if the people that we trust to have done a lot of research, which journalists get to spend time in the weeds that most of us don't have time to do, that we often look to them for that guidance or that insight. Yeah. Yeah. It's maybe a little worrisome that to me there are some pretty clear indicators of which candidates, you know, would be most ideal for democracy and journalism, you know, all of those sorts of things. I don't know. I don't know. But yeah, I definitely think that, you know, looking at because we often turn to these newspapers for endorsements, particularly if we aren't sure if you don't have time to research candidates ourselves. And to not have that endorsement really leaves people to their own very, very the best those sources of information.

**Peter** [00:35:34] And I do wonder how many people even realize that Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post. Yeah. And that he has, I believe, a number of incentives and relationships with particularly Donald Trump and how much of all of that contributes to a signal about where things are going.

**Meredith** [00:35:56] Yeah. How can those institutions, particularly when we think of media and journalism as being one of our protectors, right, one of our non-biased objective observers, when they end up becoming entangled and having their own motivations and interests, especially related to profits? Yeah, that becomes messy. And I, I it makes it, you know, it reinforces to me why people distrust, why people talk about a distrust in media. Yeah. It's it's there. And to me that's a signal of it probably increasing. The Washington Post doesn't want to anger people or in some way lose trust. But I think that action might backfire and have the unintended consequence of losing trust or exacerbating trust that's already been lost.

**Peter** [00:36:48] Yeah. So, I mean, obviously everybody knows that, you know, why are social workers why are two social workers talking about this? You know, we we know that social workers take away people's children and administer entitlement programs. You know, we we're not into these large kind of discussions. Right. So, yeah, let's just let's just calm down and stay in our lane, I guess. So now.

**Meredith** [00:37:14] Well, I would I would push back. If you read our code of ethics, your theory clearly calls for politically active. You know, someone who who gets to teach the code of ethics is forced me to read it a lot more than I did when I was a practitioner. Yeah, but there's very clear parts that our code of ethics that illicitly and this is a unique thing



about social workers, right? Is this is one of the things that distinguishes us from other helping professions is, yes, we're called to attend to people's needs, the immediate needs and also social change and paying attention to the driving factors of oppression and racism and violence and poverty. It's a lot. It's more honestly, I think it's more it's asking too much of most social workers that are underpaid and overworked and all that good. Yeah, but it is there. It is embedded in our profession. We are asked to do more so and I'll talk about that a little bit more when we get to solutions.

**Peter** [00:38:11] Yeah. And I mean, so here's the kind of summit to that, if you want. So, you know, we promise to talk about social work in conservative places. And and you know, all kidding aside about my, you know, uncalled for comments. You know, social workers, I think, have a stake and have a role in some of the big issues in the country. I mean, reproductive justice, health justice, environmental justice.

**Meredith** [00:38:44] I know all.

**Peter** [00:38:45] Of these things matter. And we I would argue that we should be big players in whatever way we can, whatever level or practicing and hopefully more than one. Let's go to the epicenter of these issues. And everybody could have seen this coming a mile away. But let's talk about your home. Alabama. So to talk about the future of the country and the future of commercial work. Why are we talking about Alabama? What's going on in there?

**Meredith** [00:39:21] This is my pitch to read AL.com and contribute to local news sources in Alabama. Even if you don't live here, you know I'm going to borrow from from one of our greatest Southern heroes, Dr. King. And every semester, my students and I read a letter from Birmingham Jail. And it's crazy how relevant it is. Now, after all those years and understanding the circumstances in which he finds himself arrested and placed in this Birmingham jail, and the just beautiful, eloquent document he penned there, and in response to some white ministers who had appeal to him to kind of calm down and wait. And one of the most famous lines from there's injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. And I think Alabama personifies or really shows this in action. So this is, again, that John Archibald and Kyle Whitmire, just to give them credit, the local journalists here who who created this idea of the Alabama ification of the US. Yeah. And this is a quote from John Archibald, and he says, you know, today, instead of being behind much of the South as a head when it comes to culture and political conflicts, much of what we're seeing across the nation is being pushed by that realization. So much of the rhetoric these days across the country proves we're all in one place. We are fighting it out. As goes the South, so goes America. And I'll give you some examples.

**Peter** [00:40:57] Signals.

**Meredith** [00:40:59] So if you think about so one of the most amazing things about living here and I do I love love living here is Alabama. We're one of the most biodiverse states in the country. And just have some of the most abundant natural resources. But as you mentioned, we are also the site of many environmental injustices. We spend the least amount of our money per capita in protecting those natural resources. So we have this amazing natural gift. Many Alabamians love it. Many Alabamians jobs are dependent upon it and well-being, and yet we don't take care of it. And I think what we are seeing from that is a sign of the future of crumbling infrastructure across the country. Lack of water. There are communities Jackson, Mississippi, made the national news. They're having major issues with with drinking water. Americans should not take access to clean drinking water

for granted. And we're already seeing that in here. In 2011, Alabama passed the most anti-immigrant law in the country. And I don't have to probably go into detail on that, but certainly since then, we've seen the rhetoric and the pushback against immigration and people who migrate to this country. It's just grown rapidly. And as social workers, I think most of us have a lot of concerns about the impacts of family separations and the violence that immigrants are facing in our communities and across the country. And again, this is a we could talk about that forever, but we saw the warning signs in Alabama. Also, spoiler alert, we saw how bad it was for our economy when we passed these laws. Many immigrants left Our states and our state experienced a great deal of economic pushback, so much so that our policymakers have started to shortly after that started to kind of repeal parts of the law in secret or just quietly, Shelby versus Holder, which is a Supreme Court case from 2013. That was actually that Shelby County, which is the county I live in, really dismantled a significant part of the Voting Rights Act. And what it did is it said the federal government doesn't have to give approval if you change the voting law. So previously places with a history of discrimination, if you wanted to change your voting laws, you had to get that federal clearance You don't immediately like literally overnight after that case. We saw many, many states restricting laws. Now, 29 additional states have increased voting restrictions to reproductive care. You know, I'm pretty sure most people know about what's happening in Alabama in terms of IVF. Dobbs decision out of Mississippi after that was overturned. Over half of our. States have increased restrictions to abortion and and many other reproductive rights. We are also Alabama was the first state to pass a law that made it illegal to provide gender affirming care.

**Peter** [00:44:29] I remember that.

**Meredith** [00:44:30] And it was in 2022.

**Peter** [00:44:32] They were the blueprint for other states. Yeah.

**Meredith** [00:44:35] I went to a talk recently with one of the pediatric endocrinologist who wrote We have the oldest continually operating gender affirming care clinic in the Southeast. It's here in Birmingham.

**Peter** [00:44:48] I'm sorry to say that. Say that again. I think people need to. That just almost went by me. Say that again.

**Meredith** [00:44:55] So in Birmingham, Alabama, is the oldest continuously operating gender affirming care clinic in the Southeast. Interesting. And so and I went to speak by one of the doctors who founded it and runs it, Dr. Marissa Login Ski. And it was really wonderful. And it was just this week we had to have it off campus. And I'll get to why. But she talked about this idea. She pointed out when this law was passed, they named it the Vulnerable Child Compassion and Protection Act. And just how savvy of the lawmakers it was to use the idea of a vulnerable child rights. They're using our own language. And ever since then, many, many other states have passed these laws that make it so legal or much more difficult to provide that care to kids. And so but our clinic is still operating. They are hanging in there. They have filed lawsuits. She was very clear they're not breaking any laws, but they are able to partner with other clinics and other doctors in other states so that they can continue to provide treatment and care to their clients. Thankfully, the law did not ban providing therapy or mental psychological social support, which is a huge part, if not a majority, of that work. But we've seen since that law was passed and what she said, this is what I thought was really interesting. She used the phrase data test. You said blueprint. But it's these southern states that they called the beta test. And she said they try it out

here many times. It fails at first. As a matter of fact, this law failed its first attempt. They learned from it's reconfigure, rinse and repeat. Once it succeeds here, then it just opens the floodgates for the rest of the country. Right. That model becomes replicable. We also are one of, unfortunately, several states that one of the first to pass, we call it the anti diversity equity inclusion law. Lawmakers refer to it as a divisive concepts law. I work for a public institution. I'm very proud of that. But we are now, you know, really having to think closely about what we teach on our campus, what can be funded. Some organizations that served LGBTQ, plus students that no longer can get funds from the SGA, what kind of speakers we can invite to our campus if it's having direct impact on the student lives, especially students who are involved in organizations that are supportive and encouraging, particularly if marginalized identities. And it's you know, it's kind of a scary place to be teaching critical race theory and the things that I Yeah.

**Peter** [00:47:57] So, I mean, if you're a social worker who's paying attention to signals, this is a pretty rough road.

**Meredith** [00:48:04] It's really rough. Yes.

**Peter** [00:48:06] But but here is the the paradox I think of of Alabama. I may get please correct me because I'm afraid I'm going to get this wrong. But wasn't it earlier this year? That was I what is her name? Marilyn Landes won a state Senate race. I think this was back in the spring. And just she ran primarily on reproductive rights, I think.

**Meredith** [00:48:38] And one. Yes. And you're exactly right. And this is the so this is the flip side, right? This is why I don't just, you know, stay in bed all day. Is that a lot of these, you know, progress in the United States has never been a direct path. It is always one step forward, eight steps back. And so recognizing that a lot of these laws that a social workers we see is harming people who are often marginalized or oppressed, even in harming, you know, people who have said, you know, to white women about IVF treatment. And you'll see that it's not the law that most of us want. Right. But I see these laws is really a reaction to progress that has been made. And so, for example, the race you're talking about, the fact that it's people can be ignited around these issues. You know, the pushback against LGBTQ populations comes after *Bostock v Clayton County*, which was the case out of Georgia, that made discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation illegal. It comes after a beautiful which gave the right to marry to same sex partners the Divisive concepts law. And you can trace exactly where it started and when it started. And it's particularly in response to the 1619 project. And, you know, telling different stories about our history in Alabama. We are proud to be home to the Equal Justice Initiative.

**Peter** [00:50:18] Exactly. Yeah.

**Meredith** [00:50:19] Days and days talking about they have created the first memorial in this country to the victims of lynching and go to Montgomery and visit SJI and allow yourself a couple of days, because it will take you some time to get through it and you'll want time to eat because the food was amazing. The University of Alabama previously had this started. A professor at Alabama, UVA's Alabama started this class in the public schools in Tuscaloosa, which are predominantly black students, and called the history of us or the history of us kind of a play on words. That was the first class about African-American history and public schools in Alabama. So it's, you know, the voting rights attacks, a lot of those started after progress was happening. We're seeing attacks on labor unions and laborers like that, largely because we're also seeing some successes. So,

yeah, I think you're right in that. And I guess this is my point is that while the South, we see a lot of these challenging and discouraging signals. It's really often in response to the progress that is happening here. And there's just many, many other signals of things are happening in the South that would be considered progressive elsewhere that are really amazing. And so, you know, if you can get it done here, then again, you've now you've laid out the blueprint for how to do it pretty much everywhere.

**Peter** [00:51:48] Well, that's the thing. If you're going to pay attention. You know, my takeaway is if you're going to pay attention to signals, you've got to pay attention to all of them, just not the ones that confirm your own bias at this point. Yeah. We're beginning, unfortunately, already to bump up against the time limit that we set for ourselves. So if we can get to the, you know, the part of the show where we go, All right, so what are we going to do? So what is a social especially a social worker? You know, across the various, you know, student practitioners, scholars, that whole thing, if we're going to pay attention, if we're going to have a future orientation to our thinking and we're going to follow signals and we're going to be successful, influential in the in impossible or even sometimes conservative places, what do we do? Do you have do you have some recommendations that are small or even bigger steps?

**Meredith** [00:52:50] There is no obviously easy answer. Most of these are, you know, things that require a great deal of patience and tenacity. Probably like maybe the most controversial or challenging call to people would be to move here. So also, another.

**Peter** [00:53:12] Charles Blow had that idea to.

**Meredith** [00:53:15] Actually who I was going to reference. Charles.

**Peter** [00:53:17] Okay.

**Meredith** [00:53:17] Sorry. Sorry. Go ahead. Yeah. No. What? Charles, he's picking up on this signal. We're seeing what some people are calling the next Great Migration. Right. Which is a reversal of the great friction that took place where black Americans fled the South due to terror and violence in the 20th century. We're seeing people of color return back south. Y'all. It's a lot cheaper to live here. But you you look at housing, they're still terrible, but it's much better here. And and that's Charles Blow has pointed out the potential, you know, obviously black Americans don't vote all the same way. And there's a great deal of diversity, but there is potential of of a pretty powerful bloc. Certainly we saw in Georgia with Stacey Abrams. Yeah. The South is actually the home of the most LGBTQ plus people as well. So it's another potentially powerful organizing bloc. We are here and we want more folks to come. That's a big ask. And I realize it's not fair to ask people who might experience harm. And I totally understand why people are leaving the South. It's not fair to ask people who would be the direct recipients of that disenfranchisement and that violence and that harm to take that. But for those of us that are here and those of us that might have privileges to withstand some of that organizing, connecting, joining an organization, a promise, whatever issue a social worker cares about, there is somebody who's been doing that work for decades. Sister Sol is a great example and only in it's a reproductive organization. And black women have been warning us for years, decades, centuries. Right around reproductive rights. It's not just access to abortion. It's bodily autonomy. It's respect. It's dignity. It's control. And, you know, really leading the way in terms of how do we try to get back some of those reproductive rights and to create it's not just an abortion issue, but it's really about like women's rights. And so one of my favorite organizations in Alabama is Alabama Arise. My students and I go to Montgomery every

year during the state session to advocate. And it's a coalition of people that are poor and it's directed around how do we make Alabama better for people living in poverty? I could go on and on. There are organizations and groups here that are doing stuff. Roll studios, another one I want to mention. It's amazing. And this is a collaboration between Auburn University and Hale County, which is a black belt county, very rural, very poor county in Alabama. And the architecture school at Auburn created a goal to be able to build a safe, sustainable house for under \$20,000. And they've done it.

**Peter** [00:56:15] And they've done it.

**Meredith** [00:56:16] And they're now working on some innovative technology related to septic tanks and waste treatment. So we have counties in Alabama that don't have any waste treatment. I think that's coming for lots of people with crumbling infrastructure and climate change. And so some innovation that's happening, it's happening out of necessity here that I think will provide some really interesting models in the future. So, yes, check out Real World Studio and just lots of things. And another thing I talk about with students is this idea of radical self-care, which is it's easy to get overwhelmed and feel paralyzed and not do anything. But if you can connect with an organization or a group of people now, you're not by yourself. And when you start to take action, any action, you know, giving \$5, \$10, volunteering, having conversations with your relatives.

**Peter** [00:57:21] Wait a minute. We got to draw the line somewhere.

**Meredith** [00:57:23] My gosh. My poor students. Yeah. When they come back from Thanksgiving, they're all a little shell shocked. But you know, that radical self-care is this idea that you will feel better if you feel like you are part of the same. If you feel like you are contributing. And so, you know, there's gosh, there's a whole bunch of stuff. Mutual aid is alive and well in the South. There's a great example of an auto repair, a mutual aid group in Montgomery.

**Peter** [00:57:52] Those those are the those are the redneck auto mechanics, right? Yeah, That's their term, by the way. That's not mine.

**Meredith** [00:58:00] That is their term. And I'll be honest, I think they have discontinued at the moment. But they provided a space. They all had skills in auto repair and spoken to garage in a sense. Essentially, people could bring their cars, work on it with them together, learn the auto skill. You know, they try to fund themselves just through community support. So, you know, and then as more people learn the skills and they had a greater number of people who could share that skill with their neighbor and it's essential. It's Alabama. You have to have a car with no public transportation. So you you know, if you're going to go to work or the doctor or school or whatever, you have to have a car. And so it was a way to really attend to the immediate needs of Alabamians. Yeah. So there's, you know, stuff happening everywhere. And so that's, you know, the more we're out there, the more we know.

**Peter** [00:58:55] Meredith, thank you for a wonderfully inspiring, unique and more than anything like a macro level road map for the more and more students and scholars and practitioners who really are getting the idea that, you know, we're not going to do this one case at a time.

**Meredith** [00:59:17] One more pitch, because I know within social work, a majority of social work students go on to do direct practice. But what we're talking about here or direct

practice skills, right? We're talking about listening. We're talking about communication, developing empathy, and creating space. Like our social workers are well prepared for this task of community organizing and social connection. And so I don't see it as something foreign, I see it actually as a natural way to utilize those skills to create that big change. And yes, local politics run for office, pay attention again in Alabama. It doesn't really.. we know Trump's going to win, but there are some issues down ballot. Pay attention. Whoever's in your state house is having more impact on you than who's in D.C., I promise. So, you know, there are rooms for, you know, just like the election that you reference, the local election, you can have more influence. It's often easier. You know, our mayoral campaign is usually decided by a handful of votes, Right? So, yeah, there's lots of opportunities where direct action matters.

**Peter** [01:00:29] Thank you again for your enthusiasm and your kind of list of aspirations that we can do. Wonderfully practical. And thank you for helping us understand the duality that is Alabama and perhaps us. So I, you know, I think anything before we kind of drop the hammer here, anything you want to say as we say goodbye?

**Meredith** [01:01:00] I think I've said it all, but come visit, you know, start by a visit. There's lots of.. for no other reason, come for the food, but lots of amazing places. So, you know, if moving here is too much to ask, come visit, come meet us, connect to us. There's amazing stuff happening in the South for sure.

**Peter** [01:01:21] Thanks again, Meredith. It was a pleasure.

**Meredith** [01:01:23] Yeah. Thank you.

**Peter** [01:01:25] Thanks again to Meredith Tetloff for joining us today. The sometimes seemingly impossible team of the In Social Work podcast, our Steve Sterman, our Web and tech guru, our GA production assistant, Ryan Tropf. Say hi, Ryan. Hello. And me. I'm Peter Sobota. Sometimes you miss an inSocialWork Podcast, or you just find out that we have a couple of hundred podcasts in the books. We understand. Just go to our website and [insocialwork.org](http://insocialwork.org) for our latest shows and brows our catalog by categories. See you next time, everybody.