

BRONX VOICE

SOCIAL WORKERS: ‘HELPING YOU IS EXACTLY WHAT I DO’



VNSNY Social Workers in the Bronx Kenia Alcantara and Margarita Roldan.

By Chandra Wilson, March 17, 2020

March is [Social Work Month](#) and a great time to celebrate the impact—large and small—that social workers have on daily life, especially for those in greatest need. Social workers are the ones who make sure that people living with medical challenges have food in the refrigerator, and can get to doctor’s appointments and secure the entitlements and benefits they need, and have access to behavioral health services as well as safe housing. They are truly unsung heroes of our healthcare professions.

At the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York \(VNSNY\)](#) where I work, 250 licensed social workers and 170 related social services staff make hundreds of phone calls and visits every week to advocate and care for patients throughout New York’s five boroughs and Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties. The National Association of Social Workers has designated the theme of this year’s Social Work Month as [Social Workers: Generations Strong](#)—a concept that resonates powerfully with VNSNY’s social workers, who are committed to changing lives across generations, from young families to New York’s vulnerable elders.

Here are just a few of the ways that social workers in your area are helping people live their best lives.

Inspiring Memories of a Lifetime – As the home healthcare team helped Josh, age 27, recover from a life-threatening illness that, among other things, wiped out his long-term memory, social worker Dolly Garcia-Willix was inspired to help him make new memories. She wrote JetBlue airlines to see if they would pick up the tab for Josh and his brother—neither of whom could afford a big trip—to fly to Disneyland. “And JetBlue agreed,” Garcia-Willix marveled. “The brothers couldn’t believe it!”

Using humor, storytelling and unconditional support to elevate her clients’ mood and quality of life, Garcia-Willix connects individuals and families in need to resources that create meaningful change. She helped one client get out of the house by connecting her to a nonprofit organization that builds wheelchair-accessible ramps, and also helped the client feel better about herself by introducing her to a hairdresser that makes house calls. For family caregivers who feel overwhelmed and isolated, Garcia-Willix shares stories about caring for her own 94-year-old mother. “It’s amazing how one person’s story can be so similar to another’s,” says Garcia-Willix, a senior social worker in Nassau and Queens Counties who has been with VNSNY for 17 years. “Every day, I learn something new from my patients. That is without a doubt one of my favorite parts of being a social worker!”

Giving Voice to Those in Need – VNSNY social worker Sandra Fleming has a master’s degree, rigorous professional training, and 14 years in the field—all of which gets poured into her work improving clients’ lives. But it was training of a different order that raised the spirits of one client. Visiting a former clergy member with dementia who is now nonverbal, Fleming—an avid [motorcyclist](#), theatre and film fanatic, and drummer in a band—delivered what turned out to be just the right medicine: singing a rousing gospel hymn. To her great surprise and delight, her client suddenly found his voice. “He joined in and sang every word,” she says.

“Our job is about treating the whole individual from beginning to end,” notes Fleming, enumerating responsibilities that include advising on life decisions, connecting people to support in the community, and advocating for them in the healthcare system. “We meet with people who can’t even get out of bed in the morning, so how can we expect them to call insurance companies or write checks?” she adds. “Thankfully, we are able to fill in these gaps and get patients the support that they need.”

Speaking the Same Language – Ling Wai Fung has cared for clients ranging in age from young parents with babies to centenarians. Through it all, he prides himself on bringing a depth of cultural understanding that puts clients at ease and increases the impact he can have on their lives. A native Cantonese speaker, he works with many Chinese American individuals and families, including an expectant mother whom the healthcare team visited for a minor condition and whom he was able to help in unexpected ways. “It was a typical Chinatown immigrant story,” he says, explaining that her husband was working out of state, and she found herself in a new country with limited support. While she was able to navigate the social benefit system successfully, he notes, “what was lacking was the emotional support. I know that the Chinese people traditionally don’t give or ask for a lot of emotional support. But with me, she was able to talk about her concerns, and was able to cry and vent a little. I know I left her with a good feeling.”

Using Technology to Strengthen the Human Connection — Social workers Margarita Roldan and Kenia Alcantara do much of their communicating—with each other, and with their clients and their families—through a computer tablet, which actually strengthens the human connections they are able to make. Family caregivers, the pair explain, are often so overwhelmed that much of the education and support takes place after the social workers leave the house. “We often email caregivers the same information that we’ve gone over with them in person, so they can have it for their records,” says Alcantara, who’s been a social worker for 23 years. “When you’re talking to someone who is overwhelmed, they will only absorb a limited amount of what you’re telling them, so giving them something to refer to is key.”

The social workers also find themselves serving as informal IT support for older clients, helping them enlarge fonts, brighten screens, and better navigate cell phones and other technology. “Even making simple changes helps them significantly, because now they’re able to answer their phone,” says Alcantara. “We’re willing to do anything for our patients, but it can be the smallest actions that end up being the most meaningful for our patients.”

Alcantara and Roldan see and feel that meaningful change every day. “Clients express so much gratitude,” says Roldan, who’s been in the field for four years. “I’ll reply to them, ‘I’m a social worker—I’m just doing my job. Helping you is *exactly* what we’re here to do.’”

An Ounce of Prevention – As home healthcare workers well know, everything is harder during a crisis. That’s why social workers strive to help clients make choices and take action *before* an emergency happens, including naming a healthcare proxy and a power of attorney if they become incapacitated. “A lot of people I see believe that they won’t outlive their money, but as medical care continues to advance, people are starting to live longer—and planning for that is essential,” says social worker Melissa DiLorenzo, who serves clients in Staten Island.

Her colleague Dahlia Gonzalez, with 25 years at VNSNY and nearly 40 years as a social worker, has helped countless clients with their advance planning—as well as those in the middle of a crisis who need a navigator and an advocate. She still recalls working with a client who had ill-advisedly switched insurance plans, and learned that the new payor wouldn’t cover a surgical procedure she needed. Gonzalez worked tirelessly to re-enroll her client in her original insurance, and didn’t relent until the client was able to have the surgery and get back on her feet. “She didn’t know what to do or who to go to,” Gonzalez recalls. “We all enter the social work profession to serve people in need—and that’s what we do every day.”

DiLorenzo agrees wholeheartedly and adds that there is a special value in helping people at home. “Working with patients in the comfort of their own homes is an enormous blessing,” she says. “It allows us to meet them where they are and see what it’s like on their turf, under their terms. Just by looking around their homes, we get a glimpse of their living conditions, their family life, their hobbies, and what holds meaning for them. It helps us build common ground, and that is the heart of our profession.”