

Defining Creativity S1E14: Carlene Quinn transcript

Debbi: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining me for this episode of *Defining Creativity*, a podcast that explores where and how creativity is found. I'm your host, Debbi Ponella, a creativity researcher, cultivator, and devotee. On today's episode, we're joined by...

Carlene: Hi, I'm Carlene Quinn. I am the BSW program coordinator for the IU School of Social Work at Indiana University, and I'm excited to talk about creativity, and also what does it mean to be a social worker and how is that even creative?

Debbi: And I'm excited to have you here as well, Carlene. Thank you so much. Let's just get started right away and do tell us how social work is creative.

Carlene: So, some of the things that I find to be most enjoyable about my job is teaching people that not every day is the same. Social workers have a really unique privilege to be with anybody from pre-birth to when they're passing. And for every social problem, there's likely a social worker working on it. Social workers are really meant to facilitate change, but that's based on what their clients want. And in order to do that, you have to be really creative in helping people figure out what they're good at. Maybe if they've had a lot of trials, what kind of strengths they bring to the table.

And a lot of times when we point out strengths to folks, they're surprised. They're not things they maybe have heard before, or even thought of themselves in that way. And it can really change how they perceive themselves. Like if, wow, somebody else saw me this way, maybe I really am this way or I could be that way. Even the worst of situations and circumstances, there's something in there inherently about a person that is a strength.

And, when we highlight for people the tools that they can learn or that they have ready for them to use, then they feel empowered to make the change themselves. And all day, we hear people telling us what to do and how to do it and do it over or try a different format. You know, just even marketing techniques, right? Anti-aging versus pro-aging, all these other things. I mean, because as if nothing is okay the way it is. And when we give people tools, they can decide they're ready for change.

We might plant seeds a lot of the time and you hear that a lot with social work. There's a lot of trust in the ability to plant a seed and not knowing when it's going to bloom, not knowing as a social worker if you're going to be the one that gets to see it. But it's just a privilege to be in that space where a person can be that vulnerable. And then maybe later you find out that they have succeeded or exceeded their own expectations. And that's, to me, one of the best gifts.

But in order to do that, a social worker can't be a very binary thinker, right? We work heavily in the gray, the 90% where you got 5% on one end of extremely wrong and 5% on the other extremely right. So, being able to work in that gray space where a lot of folks aren't comfortable, makes it easier for a person to feel seen, heard, and valued. Where a lot of times when folks have challenges in their life, they feel like they need to fit a box because that's how we learn, right?

If I ask people what the 13th letter of the alphabet is, they normally have to run through the first 12 to figure that out. You know, the way our brains kind of work to acquire information quickly is to put things in boxes so we can move on and store it away. But in social work, we can't do that. We have to constantly pull things from the past, new experiences, support and challenge, tools that the client... We might even teach them if they don't have, so that they can feel confident to use those tools as they need. And so, social workers really do enhance a lot of those opportunities and I get to have the privilege of not only being a social worker, but teaching people how to be a social worker. So, it's a blast to watch.

Debbi: Amazing. So, looking at some of those things you're talking about trying to foster in people, initially you do need to make them comfortable in that vulnerable space in order to be able to see those things about themselves. How do you do that? How do you approach and generate that kind of safe environment that encourages that?

Carlene: [4:37] Well, I think there's a lot of things we learn about how we communicate, what we do with our bodies, what we don't do with our bodies. Do we wiggle around a lot? Do we have no eye contact, too much eye contact? Are we too loud? Do we cut people off? Do we give them space? Do we use minimal encouragers, like nodding and repeating back to them what we heard them say, reframing, using their words?

And often those little skills that we have mastered and we don't really think about as a skill set that we bring to the table can get through a lot of the murky parts for folks. When people don't have the words for themselves to articulate, right, and I think that's to me really powerful. When people can't articulate their own feelings, then that's when they have a little bit of trouble knowing what to ask for or identifying what the challenge is for themselves.

So we also set up ground rules, right? What is said here stays here, unless the following things: like you're a threat to yourself or others, or, in the worst scenarios, if you have to report abuse or neglect. We also give people a lot of choice, right, I'm not a person that has to report an incident if it's an adult and there's no... You know, it's a choice if they're a victim and they want to report or not correct. So, for a person to feel okay about not being judged, that's a really special spot to be in with somebody.

Like, I'm not their parent. I'm not their sister. I'm not, if they're a person, a member of faith, I'm not their clergy. I'm not their neighbor. I am somebody that maybe nobody in their life will know except me. And so, in social work, how we work, that is to get ourselves out of the situation. Like, take your own personality out. It's not about us, it's about them, and that usually relaxes.

You know a new social worker or someone who's uncomfortable with someone who might be a little different than them, and I think honestly, that's where we grow the most. We get uncomfortable. So, I have a regular saying with students, let's get uncomfortable. If we're not uncomfortable, we're not working very hard and we're getting complacent or unoriginal, and that's when you can burn out too right? Because you're not pivoting and re-energizing yourself.

And so the position of a social worker is incredibly creative, flexible and uses all bells and whistles to, not only just in the address of social systems, but it's really in many realms right, like how we address problems or situations. Who do we ask, right, to help? Or do we go to bat to advocate for somebody that maybe has been rejected from housing multiple times and they're tired of dealing with this client, who might be difficult because they have a lot of stressors going on in their life, so they maybe aren't on time and when they are ill they're a little scattered and they're noisy or whatever the challenge is.

But to maybe have the other party have some empathy and sometimes just doing that, having that conversation with the person who has to do the awful job of telling people no, might be enough for them to feel empowered to say yes. And that's investment of time and it isn't something that we often make room for in our American society—is to check the box, move on, go to the next. But in social worker we have to take the time because our clients are worth it.

So we spent 90% of our time on about 10% of the population. And, you know, they're just as worthy as the rest of us. And you know when you talk with people you realize how much of their story is just one derailment away for any of us and how easily it could be any one of us that has that kind of crisis that could use help. I think that's why we're hearing so much right now about we need social workers in every level and every... I mean even the School of Music would like a social worker to help students when they're stressed, and I think it's great.

I like the stigma is being reduced, and I think the more that the stigma is constantly being reminding us all that we need to take care of it, I think, helps us to maybe access services, or to say, my mental health is struggling right now or I'm feeling worn out. I'm so thrilled that people can say that, like everyday people, people who don't normally say those things, are talking that way. I mean, that's a really healthy sign.

Debbi: [9:31] I'm thinking, as you're talking about this, though, to be in those kind of situations, and you're talking about burnout, which we are beginning to hear in society more about, which, again, it's good to be talking about that. How do you avoid that? I know you're talking about maybe removing yourself, as far as this is about the client or the person you're working with, but I'm sure you still get invested in that, and how do you avoid that kind of- just you know, heartbreaking... heartbreakingness, breaking your heart too, and dealing with that. It takes such an incredible person in my mind to be able to do what you do.

Carlene: In actuality, I think all of us inherently do grab the sleeve of a colleague right and say, hey, I just want to talk to you about this situation, and sometimes just being able to speak about it and being affirmed that we did all we could, is usually all it takes. Developing really good routines to have a different... Even though social workers maybe in some ways can be very casually dressed depending on their, the environment they're working

in, because you don't want to be, you know, sticking out when you're working with clients you want to meet them where they're at. They usually change their clothes completely, their entire outfit when they get home.

They may have certain music they listen to. They may have certain routines that they pick up is just kind of a signal biologically that they are moving out of the job for the day. And I think that that's one of the things that's really healthy. And, I think almost every social worker I know is also an artist in their own way, and that has been my favorite thing— to discover what folks' hidden expression is outside of social work field right? And that's where I'm just blown away by the varied talents that are just, for some of them, quote 'hobbies,' but they are pretty prolific at it. And that talent balances out all the other things they might hear or see, to keep them engaged right into the profession. And I think that that's really.

Carlene: [11:38] Most social workers don't go into their week thinking it's going to be just exactly as planned when they woke up in the morning. They expect that it's going to be... Something else might come up that require... is a five alarm and someone may not show up, right? So social workers are constantly adapting. And I think the other thing that's interesting about social workers is they can handle quiet space. Musicians can handle quiet space. A lot of other people, it makes them squirm. And so being able to handle that moment when someone has to be quiet to let collect themselves or find their words or just grieve or whatever is burdening them, is really powerful.

Debbi: I think it's incredible that, that you can embrace those uncomfortable feelings. That's such a skill, and whether it's the quietness we're just living in— that ambiguity and the uncomfortable and so many of the things that you've already touched on. I mean, first of all, I can see how it's years of training and practice and all those things, because it's just so much already that you said in just a few minutes. But because we're focused on creativity, basically you have outlined all the creative theories and all of the characteristics from, you know, creative problem-solving and open to possibility and different perspectives and diversity, being comfortable in that, risk taking. Like, I can go down the list in all of my textbooks about creativity and I pretty much feel like you've already hit on all of them. Or you know flexibility, you know everything. So, first of all, Wow, you know and thank you. I'm interested... So you are a social worker, but you also work and teach social workers.

Carlene: I do, yeah.

Debbi: So these are all not easily taught skills, or at least not if you put it... you're not gonna have a section on flexibility. You kind of can in a way. But how do you teach these? How do you approach developing and nurturing these skills in your students?

Carlene: [14:04] The first thing we do is we teach them about the social work values and perspectives which it's really unique, that we're a value-based profession that has a code of ethics. So the fact that we have those and we have a licensure process, you know, communications-privileged right. So, when students can get that grasp, it's then much easier to move into how the values of, like, a person's right to self-determination. So I might think, Debbi, you need something other than you think you need.

But if you don't think you need it, then we're not going to focus on that right now because I'm probably not going to get anywhere with it, right? But maybe because I planted the seed, you might later say, okay, after we've worked on something else for a while. You might go, hey, I'd like to address this challenge and I don't know how to do it. Then we can work together on it, but it's when you're ready and not when I'm ready.

And so there's a lot of things like that get teased out very early, so students learn all about the different aspects of the field in their first course that's required for the major. And then the second course is called "Diversity in a Pluralistic Society." Well, that one just like, wow.

Debbi: And how many semesters do you get them for that?

Carlene: Right?

Debbi: Oh my goodness. How in the world do you pack that into a single course?

Carlene: Right? So all of those two courses are woven into the rest of the curriculum for the four years. And then as they become to their, what we call kind of their major years, right? Their junior year, they focus on practice skills. So we call them fishbowls where they have to— one's a client and one's the social worker and

they have to practice certain theories and skill perspectives and deliver all of that and then get feedback from their peers. And it literally feels like you're in a fishbowl. So, or maybe feels like you're being on stage.

But I think it's a really neat opportunity for a student to recognize that sometimes they're gonna be in that role and other people are gonna be around and they're still gonna maintain the role with the client and not be paying attention to all the other details around them. And I think that's a skill that also develops, right? To be able to tune all of the noise out and just focus on the person. But it is fun to watch them blossom.

Some of them are go-getters and they're kind of halfway there when we get them, and others have some other experiences in life. Maybe they are coming to school a little later, but they've been working with people and realize that in order to get to where they want, they probably need that degree.

I think one of the things that's fascinating about social workers is, you know, we're an old profession. We've been around a long time and like our school's been around for over a hundred years and we are exploding, but we were so teeny tiny for so long, you know, we don't spend our time tooting our own horns, right? We're helping other people find their horns and showing them how to use it. And I think that that's kind of a different look, right?

You know, now the pandemic kind of made it clear that, you know, we're the number one mental health provider of services, combining psychiatry, psychologists and counselors, top of them all, 95% of it is by social workers. This just blows my mind, but it makes complete sense to me. I mean, I can look all across campus, there are social workers everywhere here and many departments and more departments are wanting them. So, I think what's happening is that agencies want social workers and we still can't make enough. Nationwide, we can't make enough social workers right now.

It's a good problem right now, I would call it. Schools want social workers and industries want social workers to help with employee challenges. And I think that's great that we're looking at mental health as not something that's a wellness checkup, but more of a prevention and maintaining mode than just a knee-jerk reaction.

I think the other thing I thought was cool about social workers though is, you know, they use their art, whatever they think their art might be. So for one of my colleagues, it was organic gardening. And when he had a booth at a farmer's market, he was just the farmer, right? And some people who would run into him would be like, oh, hi, his name's Bruce. Oh, hi, Bruce, you know, aren't you a social worker? He's like, I'm both, but like you can compartmentalize those roles. And I thought that was just kind of neat.

So, I have a good friend on campus, she is a photographer, and she's also involved in theater. There's another one on campus who is a musician and another one that is a quilter. And regularly they'll participate in expressing their art in some way, shape, or form. We've had a couple of students who were stand-up comics for fun. I mean, so I just think social workers are very creative inherently. And I think that for some reason, they fit well in the major, you know?

Debbi: [19:16] I definitely wanna get back to the artistry part of it, but I don't wanna lose track of some of the things that you mentioned that I just wanna follow up on a little bit.

Carlene: Sure.

Debbi: You're talking about when they're doing these group activities and they can never possibly imagine all the situations they'll end up being in. There's just no way. So that's, again, cultivating the creative problem-solving and flexibility. But you also mentioned that when you're with a client in certain situations, they really have the choice. They really have the control.

So I'm thinking about this and I'm trying to picture it. First, my mind went to, so it's collaborative because you're really working with the client in a way, but you're collaborating in a way that you ultimately don't have the say and the decision.

Carlene: That's right.

Debbi: Um, so how do you navigate that? Because I can imagine you want something for them so much, or you want them to see it, but you can't control that. That's got to be a really unique way. The only thing that's coming

to my mind is maybe like a composer who makes a piece of music and then somebody plays it differently and it becomes a collaboration and it's different. It's still their art, it's still their work, but...

Carlene: Yeah.

Debbi: ...there's that element of it. So how do you think about that?

Carlene: [20:46] Well, I think how I look at it is: it's an opportunity, right? And opportunities may not have great timing. So sometimes when a client says, yeah, I'm not comfortable with that right now, then that's what we do. You let it go for now and say that's fine, we can recircle back at this some other time, you know, or when you're ready. You can, we can talk about it or revisit it, and that's okay.

I think a lot of times clients, when they get to the point of saying they need a social worker, might be feeling so covered over of challenges and problems that they can't see a light out right? And to have the gift of a choice just is so freeing that they feel it's okay to share all this stuff that they're afraid to talk about—and I call it stuff because it's really often accumulated trauma and wounds and it's heavy stuff and maybe they're embarrassed, right, like some of the things that had happened, they're just shamed about, or they're ashamed about their response or lack of response and they just want to load it. And maybe that in itself is the release for them and to be okay with it, since one of the number one tenets of social work is it's the clients right to self-determination.

That kind of guides everything, right? So, if I was to find a job, for somebody to help them find a job, maybe that needed some assistance doing that. I would have to focus on what they're interested in or what are their skills, and not put them into something that I think they should do, but more rather what they're wanting to do, because if they don't want to do it, it may not be successful, right?

Debbi: Right. Absolutely.

Carlene: So, am I adding to their failure feelings or am I supporting them in growth? So it's kind of a growth mindset, right? Growing doesn't always happen linearly and it's kind of bumpy and hilly and sometimes takes different paths, but to know that it's possible is wonderful. And I think the creative process is when you begin to trust yourself and using your skills to help the clients see themselves in their own authentic way, and when a client can feel seen. It's such a great thing to witness and experience. I don't know, I think it's just such a privilege. It sounds so strange to say, but it really is a privilege to share in someone's space.

Debbi: And I love that you're talking about how you're listening— again, just everything creative you're hitting on, but to being able to listen and even when you earlier referred to how you dress...

Carlene: Mmm- hmm.

Debbi: ...you're taking it all in by listening and being present and seeing your environment and their environment, and you're becoming a part of that and adjusting. Do you find that when you look at the world outside of your job, do you find that that translates some? Are you laughing because you're never outside of your job? Your job is all the time probably? I know.

Carlene: I swear I have social work blazed across my head, 'Talk to me. Go ahead.'

Debbi: Carlene, I was asking a really serious question. No, no, that's funny. I'm just I'm trying to think that just being able to be open and to see the environment in the world around you, I feel like you would connect more with the world outside of that, just in general, do you find that to be true?

Carlene: [24:09] Absolutely yeah. It is very difficult for me to go anywhere and not have that kind of feeling. Bloomington is a small college town. I feel like we explode every fall and then it slows down. But because of that I have a keener sense of awareness I think, of others, challenges, barriers, or when I see something, I go: oh, that's happening because of this, where that's just not even remotely on the page of most people and that's just kind of pre-wired in me by now.

Debbi: But does it allow you to see the beauty, to, oh, like and connect with the other parts? I just feel like you've tapped in so deeply to your empathy and your creativity and just everything that it's got to be just a beautiful, not everything. I'm not...

Carlene: No, no.

Debbi: ... belittling anything, but I feel like you'll see this beautiful world in a different way, and people.

Carlene: I totally do, yeah. And I think social workers just do. We don't take things for granted because of what the folks we work with have been through, like stuff that people should never have to deal with. And so seeing the like the little things like I it's obnoxious, but I pull over for sunrises and sunsets all the time, right? I wake up most mornings before the sun. That is also obnoxious. It's just what it is. But I do it so much that other people send me pictures, you know, that know I like sunrises and sunsets. And I thought, wow, won't it be sad on a day I don't get to notice the clouds. You know, trees or the leaves changing.

You know, when I'm talking to students about burnout prevention or how to reduce anxiety, I tell them to get outside 20 minutes a day, take a different path to class, notice the leaves changing with the seasons. See if you hear any birds. What kind of bird is it? Try to find a building you've never been in before. You know, just all those things, they're just like, oh my gosh, I didn't even notice this stuff because they were just focused, honed in on their thoughts and their goals for the day.

And that's the stuff that you don't have to be an artist to do, but you may have not remembered you had those opportunities to savor. You know, and teaching people how to create their own self-care. I mean, we haven't done a great job of that as a society to maintain consistently, but I think it's really important. And so things that as far as creativity goes, I really believe that social workers trust their creative gut. They've had some experiences with being creative and successful. I find really fun parallels like they're musicians, they've been artists. Oddly, we've had a lot of lifeguards, a lot of lefties, left-handed folks.

Debbi: Oh, I want to see the research on that one.

Carlene: It's pretty intriguing. I think it's like really wild how many of us there are, but I think there's something about that, right? Or the young people that have always volunteered in their life. They're not doing it just because they're part of a philanthropy group or a sorority or a fraternity or a club. They're doing it because that's what they've done with their family. So that's also a place I think that creates beauty and creativity, right? I mean, you can see people who have some needs and you can maybe provide a little bit of time or energy. That's pretty rewarding stuff, even for a kid.

Debbi: And I think that sort of leads to a question of experiences and education. And I know we were just catching up a bit before we started recording the podcast that one of your daughters is going into social work.

Carlene: Yeah.

Debbi: The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, you know, and I get that. But you have a unique experience then as a practitioner, as an educator, and as a parent to see those skills develop. That's amazing. So, what do you see that has allowed that to happen maybe in education? Where do those kind of nurturing, fostering creativity, and just that awareness, where does that belong or where do you see it in education?

Carlene: [28:25] So, I would say that very early, allowing a child to express themselves by writing a letter to an editor, creating art for folks to enjoy maybe on a dementia unit, writing cards for folks who will never meet, who maybe don't get any mail, right? Like a lot of folks maybe who are homebound, and they get meals delivered, you know, as little as kindergartners, they can start that. They can make a difference. And that connection to humanity very early on makes everybody, you know, you approach everybody with humanity.

If you think that everybody's deserving, right, and worthy, and you're thinking that everybody deserves dignity, those are all social work tenants. I really think that's where it can start. So, both of my girls in kindergarten wrote letters to the editor because their teacher said, would you like to write a letter? It had all the special spelling that the kindergartner would have had, but for one of the kids, it turned into an editorial that was at another paper. And from there, they highlighted a five-year-old can say people don't have enough food that we should give them more. You know, people should donate more. It was really powerful to see that. And for a five-year-old, that was just... She stood up so straight that she could in her short little five-year-old self and so proud because she could see it.

Then they were allowed to do a food drive at school. Another kid wrote a letter about littering. You know, really doesn't like littering people. Please just take the time to put things away and so just little things. By giving children voices, I think starting an education and making it okay. How do we learn if we don't take risks and we don't grow confident if we don't take risks.

So even if you make something or try something, that is not successful, it's not a failure. You tried, you took a risk and that's how we grow. So when I look at having a young adult becoming a social worker and she's going into forensic social work and I listened to her talk about social and criminal injustice and what her goals are and she's interested in helping people stay out of prison, get out of prison, reform prison, and I was like, wow, that's a big list—in my mom mind, you know. And I was like, wow, she is really teaching me a lot.

I don't think I had anything to do with that, we just gave opportunities right when she declared it in college—we're like, really, that's amazing social work and criminal justice. Cool, all right. Never would have guessed that.

Debbi: Do you see other kinds of things beyond what you and maybe some of these special teachers are able to do? What other kinds of things in our education system? What do you think benefits the development of creativity, and that openness to learn these skills?

Carlene: [31:24] I think we can make more room for assignments to have choices. I think technology and using it for advocacy, right, or expression, is an easier grasp for students to get. But if we had more assignments we gave young people that are not so very black and white with papers and citations, but stuff that's creative expression that might have components to it that they have to meet for the standards, but make it that there's options to choose.

When I've done that with students, no matter what level, no matter if it was a girl scout leader or mentoring teenagers, or working with college students, that seemed to be the best version, because people like autonomy, right. They want to have some buy-in, and that way they get really excited.

Debbi: [32:08] You mentioned, too, photography, stand-up comedy, music, being a lifeguard. Oftentimes sports and arts get put into separate baskets and they each get shortchanged to a variety of what they do, you know. But put them in sports for one thing and put them in arts for another, but they learn those all sorts of skills in both of them, with collaboration and leadership. So obviously those are characteristics and experiences that some of the people who are you're working with...

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: ...as far as social workers, have developed and experienced. I was wondering, just to turn it on its head a little bit, are you able to use or do you see that kind of creative expression and experiences as helping your clients if they're able to tap into any of those, or is there any way that creativity becomes a healing or helping in a way?

Carlene: Mm hmm. Absolutely. A lot of social workers work with art therapists and they recognize that sometimes people can't express in words what they can't express through art or music. And, I think we don't give people enough opportunities to do that and when we make space for that, it's so healing.

Cathleen Weber, she was a social worker in town who used to run the Better Day Club, and it was her folks who had dementia. And so, it was a day program and Cathleen's role at Better Day Club was to facilitate and organize all of these things like art therapy and music therapy and there were social workers there. Some of the social work students would be one-on-one with somebody that needed more assistance, right, to do the activity or to be able to participate fully, because they have, you know, they need to be supervised. They have dementia and they're in a later stage.

So that is just a beautiful thing to watch, to watch a bunch of folks. You can play a song from you know 50 years ago and they can sing every word. But if they were to talk they maybe wouldn't have talked, but after they've been singing they'll speak. And I think it's pretty well wonderful. It's just so beautiful to watch that and to watch the family. You know they just get tears streaming down their face, that like for a moment there, there was a quickening with that person, right? They start to feel like they're back to their old selves, just for a window of time. But it is very healing.

And for clients, you know we have worked with folks who've had all sorts of things happen to them.

Debbi: Sure.

Carlene: And, they don't have a clear way of expressing themselves and maybe the way that they do, it is through communication creativity. So even if I wanted to have a client try to better explain or maybe make a visual with them about what their family system look like, we could do an eco map. And that's where you have a drawing with symbols like hashed lines, right. There's maybe kind of broken communication and you can make it— put as many people in your, what you consider family and then as you want. Are they close to you? Are they far away... kind of like a solar system, right.

Debbi: Mm- hmm.

Carlene: And when the client sees that, they just get so excited because they really— yeah, that's, that's it. Nope, that line needs to be shorter, this one needs to be longer. Cut that line off and it just helps them to see you could say things like— wow, it's amazing you got through all of that, right, but the resiliency, all the things you've been through and look how strong you are, I'm amazed that you're here today.

And sometimes for somebody to hear that, it just hits them differently, right, like not in victim mode, but more like wow, there's something inside of me that for some reason I didn't fall off, you know, the bandwagon when that happened. I got to stay on track and how did that work? But my sibling didn't, or no matter what was going on with my folks, I'm still here.

Debbi: And they're special and they matter.

Carlene: Yeah, and social workers often can pull out those little things that make a person unique, that maybe they just have kept really kind of hovered up and quiet because it hasn't been safe. You know, I think in education, creative expression, any form of it, can be channeled well. And I think educators, if you know, you got a kid that's creative and they're just brains always doing creative things, reading or doing art or making noises, making songs...

To channel that is better than to squelch it, because squelching it is just gonna teach them they have lousy ideas and that's super unproductive for everybody and so hurtful.

Debbi: Yeah. I think that's just key and everything: to understand that your voice matters, that you're unique, all those things that you're saying, that you're special, no one else is like you and if you don't show up, if you're not here, then we've missed something.

Carlene: That's right.

Carlene: [37:40] It's really neat when folks have creative teachers, right, teachers that entertain creative ideas from their student. I remember one of my kids petitioned a teacher. She was studying— I think it was the Holocaust, okay. And for, I think was a social studies course in middle school, she petitioned her language arts teacher that she could write about what she was working on for her assignment versus just... She goes, I've read this book already. I really want to talk more about this.

So, the teacher sat down with her and interviewed her about why she thought that would meet the needs of the assignment and she accepted the petition. I was like, that again, is an opportunity for a student to take something they're passionate about and expand on that expressing creatively. I thought it was great.

Debbi: I think it's absolutely so important to have things that are relevant.

Carlene: Yeah.

Debbi: Because, your child will never forget that and it was so much more meaningful...

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: ...because it wasn't a random assignment.

Carlene: Exactly, and she didn't do it like well, so-and-so told me that I should maybe talk to you. It was all on her and we just supported it. We stayed completely out of the way because, you know, I could be a helicopter parent. But how is that helping my child, right? I want them to have a voice, find their voice, express their voice and feel okay about it.

Debbi: And that intrinsic motivation...

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: ...to have that not everything piled on you are given to you or a true, false, multiple choice.

Carlene: Yes.

Debbi: Let's say why we're choosing what, you know? Let's have those discussions and be open to those different perspectives. And I love that your children have had those experiences and that you're giving those types of experiences at different levels to others, because I think that's just... I mean, that's how this world is going to get better.

Carlene: And I think what you said is really important, the part about... taking the parts of the learning right and making it consumable to that individual. Because I think if we don't explain why we have to learn something to children or to students or humans, then they may not have a buy-in. The reason why we need to talk about this is because, in order to get here, we have to start here. And this is gonna help you get to the next step, and usually that makes complete sense to somebody, right? And I think that is often where they go, Oh, okay, so this is a process. I get it now. And I think we undermine children's capacity to understand that when we don't explain the why's.

Debbi: Or even ask the questions, because let them figure out the why, because then they've learned that too. And sometimes you have to be open as the adult or the teacher or the director or whatever you're doing too. Ah, okay, we can do it that way, because we want people growing up to be thinkers.

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: Not just critical. Creative thinking is paired. It's together. It's all important.

Carlene: [40:34] Well, and the critical thinkers, right, those who can, like, break things down easily and then turn around and be creative, are often... rare. Like if you're in a group of people and they're having a very formal meeting, those folks often feel compressed, like they don't feel like they have that freedom. But if you feel confident in your skill set, right, you're gonna throw your idea out there.

Debbi: It feels like, part of me is thinking, oh, we're going into a whole other discussion, a whole other episode because we're talking about the environment, like in a boardroom. You know those types of things. But the fact is there are all these commonalities— and it can be with how we learn to act when your child was in a play or when they were on a team, you know. Seriously, and if we can find those things that are relevant and that we can develop that autonomy and that creative thinking and that ownership and that risk-taking, all those things, being vulnerable and provide an environment...

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: ...that's going to allow it to flourish and blossom.

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: I mean, yeah, okay, I'm being maybe pie in the sky, but why not?

Carlene: That's okay. Right. Exactly.

Debbi: I mean I see it... People like you are putting out these people and helping and I find it everywhere. But sometimes I think people feel in silos.

Carlene: Yes.

Debbi: And it's over here we're doing music and we're being creative and we're over here in business and doing, being creative and, just like everybody that I talk to, they're so beautifully creative.

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: And sometimes they know it and sometimes they don't.

Carlene: Right.

Debbi: But if we can find that and then share it and then embrace it and respect it and see it in others, then...

Carlene: And celebrate it, right?

Debbi: Yes, absolutely

Carlene: I mean... And so when you're talking about the silos, right? I love knocking out silos. Not meaning knocking them over, but just breaking the norms, because I feel like only then, when we bust up norms, things we've taken for granted all the time, or don't even recognize, maybe, how colonized something is or marginalizing something is or sexist practice we've had... You know, things we've just done forever, just puts up walls. And those barriers are not gonna grow anything, they just prevent you from seeing it.

And I feel like celebrating people's unique parts of themselves, even if it's not something we're interested in, right, not something we want to try, I think is really a lost art. And I think it's the pandemic maybe helped foster that, because we know artists became more creative. We know that people got more basic in figuring out how to deliver their expression. So maybe some artists who are way high-tech became more acoustic.

There's just so many cool things that we probably all have running around in our heads and I think that's what we need: to find another so that they can unlock the parts of themselves that maybe wasn't encouraged, because we all know that that happens.

Debbi: Oh, and it's just so exciting to see. Every time you, as an individual, experience that for someone else it's...

Carlene: It's amazing, isn't it?

Debbi: It is.

Carlene: One time I worked with a child who had severe dyslexia and because he was struggling so much and embarrassed, which is not uncommon when folks have learning challenges, he was acting out and it was hard to keep him in school, hard to keep him at home. You know, he's running around and stuff, and just angry and hurt and he always doodled right. So, we would talk and he'd be doodling. And so, I asked him, I said "Would you make, make something for me?" And I didn't, I didn't give him any parameters on it.

He loves cartoons. I've kind of figured that out, right, like multiple meetings with him going... And I said, "Have you ever done cartooning?" And he just looked at me really funny, and I said, "No, I'm serious. Have you ever thought about it?" "No. Everybody tells me cartoons are dumb." And I go, "Oh no. There's people..."

I know. Exactly, right? Don't scratch somebody's ideas, even if they're wonky or something you don't like. They're just ideas. There's not bad ones. And so, I said to him... I go well. I said, "What about when we have your family session, we ask your folks if you could do a contract— keep the school happy and your family happy. Don't skip school for a month. Can we try that? And then I could see if we can get you a scholarship for this cartooning class." And he just sat up straight.

I had been hanging up his artwork, right, in my office, and he said, "Nobody ever hangs my stuff up." So then, then he was making it for everybody because he's like, he was so excited. He's, like you know, a 14-year-old kid. And wow, that just was what it took for him to feel like he had purpose and value and was seen and appreciated. Nothing to do with dyslexia, right, which is what everybody's focusing on.

He actually got into a dyslexic program for folks with, you know, his significant amount of dyslexia and he finished school. And he's doing, last I heard he's doing cartoons somewhere in the world, but that, I didn't do that, he did it. And taking his strength and sharing it back, just talking about in front of him how phenomenal his art is, and have you seen this and can point it out to the parents, kind of also was a mind shift for them, because in education we often are problem focused when we involve the family.

And I think being strength focused, there's nothing better to a parent to hear what your kid is doing well for no reason. And I'm not going to pretend that our teachers aren't strapped and stressed to do things like that. However, we could come up with some better ways to support them so that they could be creative because I bet it's just as good for a teacher to give that news as it is to receive it.

Debbi: Of course, of course. Amazing. And honestly, conversations like we're having right now, I just, this is so inspiring for me. Before we go though, I must ask you, what is your definition of creativity?

Carlene: [46:51] So I think creativity is an authentic expression of yourself. And I think my idea of creativity can come in many forms. It could be a simple thing I do for myself or as unique as my day. I think creativity is really about choice. If I have a choice to go for a walk or I have a choice to sit on my deck, creativity can be so many things. It could be making a meal and listening to a favorite song and just turning off everything else and being able to enjoy those little bitty moments. You can also point them out to other people.

And sometimes it helps disrupt their, maybe a negative flow of attention, right? To divert. And I think creativity is trusting yourself to express it. Whatever that means for you, whether that's music, art, or prose, or whatever, just expressing it. I think creativity is also about being adaptable. You know, a lot of times people, maybe they're creative, but they can't do anything other than this one thing. And that in itself has maybe taken the fire out of the creativity, right? Maybe they need to find another outlet to express that in.

And I think that that's kind of interesting to see, to watch people struggle with that, to put them aside for a while and try something else. And sometimes just the stimulation of trying something new is enough to renew you. Like preparing to go on a big hike, like I wanted to go hiking so badly. So, I said, I have to get stronger. I've been hit by a drunk driver. I'm alive, obviously. It could have been so much worse. But I've had several surgeries, and I'll probably have to have more down the road. That meant I had to train, right? That meant I had to get some equipment to handle that level. And then it was the coolest thing ever, it was to be able to do it.

Debbi: Oh, that's amazing.

Carlene: And then how stimulating that was, to have that experience and share it with my family because they were with me, and share it with other people that like to hike. I get it now, like I get why they like that kind of hiking.

Debbi: Amazing. Well, that's incredibly inspiring. So, thank you. I think we'll end on that note. I have taken up so much of your time, and I so appreciate it, because this is just... It's a really, it's a unique way, but one of those ways, as you're talking, I'm thinking, well, of course, well, of course, it just makes sense, you know, that creativity and social work, they go hand in hand, and they have to.

Carlene: They really do. Literally.

Debbi: Yeah. Well, thank you. I cannot thank you enough, Carleen, for being here with me today. And I think this is really special. So, keep doing what you're doing, and thank you for it.

Carlene: Well, and thank you for wanting to help support educators to be creative, because it's really what makes the world go round. I appreciate that.

Debbi: I agree.

Debbi: That's a wrap for episode 14, my discussion with social worker and instructor of social workers, Carlene Quinn. I'm so grateful for Carlene, and for you, the audience, for tuning in. Additional thanks to August Fackler for composing and recording the music. Join me next time as I talk creativity with financial advisor and Civil Air Patrol pilot, Malcolm Webb. Meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections, and embrace your creativity, however it manifests itself in you.