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Cessie Alfonso: A Social Work Pioneer on Fighting for Humanity

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Long before forensic social work became a recognized field, Cessie Alfonso, SSW'77 was already demonstrating what social workers could bring to the criminal justice system: an understanding of people in the full context of their lives, an ability to see beyond the facts of a case, and an unwavering commitment to human dignity. Today, at 81 years old, Alfonso remains deeply engaged in the issues that have defined her life's work.

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A graduate of Rutgers School of Social Work, Alfonso built a career at the intersection of social work, criminal justice, and social justice. She became a pioneering mitigation specialist and expert witness in death penalty cases, trained attorneys and social workers across the country, and helped establish a role for social workers within public defender offices. She also spent decades advocating for women, communities of color, and other people whose lives have been shaped by systems of inequality.

Alfonso's path to social work began with nursing, earning a practical nursing degree before pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology. She was drawn to social work because of the flexibility it offered and because it aligned with her longstanding commitment to helping others. "It was a degree that allowed me an enormous amount of flexibility in my career," she said.

Born and raised in Harlem, Alfonso, an Afro Puerto Rican lesbian, came to Rutgers in her 30s, choosing the School in part because of its accelerated program, proximity to New York City and reputation. She graduated in 1977, during a period of growing feminist activism and consciousness around women's rights. Her time at Rutgers helped solidify the values that would guide her career. She remembers her practicum placements, in particular, including work at a mental health center at a time when the movement to address domestic violence was still in its early stages. "We were young, we were rowdy," Alfonso recalled. "We knew we were on the right side."

At the time, women experiencing domestic violence were often treated as though their abuse was an individual psychological problem rather than a consequence of violence and fear. Alfonso and other social workers began challenging that framework. She worked to change police responses to domestic violence and later trained police officers on how to handle these sensitivities around these cases. "I am very proud of the fact that I worked aggressively to change policing policies," she said. That early advocacy would become a foundation for the work that followed.

After graduate school, Alfonso served as a social worker while also consulting with corporations on diversity and advancement. Then, in the 1980s, she received an unexpected opportunity: to help a public defender develop the life history of a person facing the death penalty. She immediately recognized the potential. “I knew at that moment that was my niche,” she said.

Alfonso entered the field with no legal training, but she understood that social work offered something the criminal justice system desperately needed: a way to understand defendants as human beings shaped by family, community, poverty, trauma, race, gender, and other experiences. At the time, attorneys were largely unfamiliar with how social workers could contribute to capital defense. Alfonso recalls being asked what social workers actually did.

Alfonso took the opportunity to teach attorneys how to conduct interviews, understand family dynamics, perform biopsychosocial assessments, and present mitigating evidence to juries. Her work helped establish mitigation investigation as an essential component of capital defense, and she eventually founded Alfonso Consultants, providing consultation and training to attorneys and social workers nationally and internationally. She and her colleagues have undertaken more than 1,000 mitigation investigations.

Her approach is grounded in a fundamental social work principle: people cannot be understood by looking only at the worst thing they have done. In one case, Alfonso identified the impact of colorism within a family, something the attorneys had not recognized, as a potentially significant factor in understanding the defendant's life. In another, she uncovered a history of severe abuse and obsessive behavior within a family that helped explain aspects of the defendant's actions. “This was social work,” Alfonso said of the investigative process. The work required more than gathering facts. It required building relationships with families, often over years, and helping people tell painful stories in ways that could humanize defendants before a jury.

Her work took her across the country and internationally. In one particularly intensive case, she traveled to Cuba to investigate the histories of three people facing the death penalty in the United States. While there, she was questioned by Cuban agents about why she was in the country. Alfonso relied on the same skills she had developed throughout her career: reading the situation, understanding the person in front of her, and finding common ground. That

belief in the humanity of others has remained at the center of Alfonso's work.

Her influence has extended far beyond the cases she personally worked on. Over the course of her career, Alfonso trained generations of attorneys and social workers, many of whom went on to establish their own careers in mitigation and public defense. Among them was Lori James Townes, a former student whom Alfonso encouraged to pursue mitigation work. James eventually became executive director of the National Association for Public Defense. "Many of the social workers in New Jersey who did work on death penalty cases and other non-capital cases were people that came out of my shop. My legacy continues," Alfonso said.

Her contributions have been recognized with numerous honors, including the Trailblazer Award for Innovation and Leadership from New Jersey Social Work and a 2008 recognition from then-Governor Jon Corzine for her mitigation work contributing to the abolition of the death penalty in New Jersey.

For Alfonso, however, the significance of the work is less about recognition than about what social workers can accomplish when they enter systems that have historically overlooked their expertise. She points to one of the most significant changes she has witnessed: the growing presence of social workers inside public defender offices. When she began her work, social workers were largely absent from criminal defense and were often brought in only as outside consultants. Today, she says, social workers are increasingly part of defense teams.

"When I started, there were some social workers working in public defenders' offices," Alfonso said. "Primarily, they were in family court, and some were preparing pre-sentencing reports." She sees that evolution as evidence of the profession's power to change systems from within.

For current Rutgers social work students, Alfonso has a simple message: engage with the criminal justice system. "The profession of social work is an expression of our concern and care for our fellow human beings because that's what we represent: our humanity," she says. "The criminal justice system works to diminish the humanity of those individuals in their charge. So having social workers involved is fighting the battle."

For Alfonso, that battle has taken many forms over the course of a remarkable career from advocating for survivors of domestic violence to challenging racial and gender inequities, from teaching attorneys to understand the lives behind their cases to fighting against the

death penalty. But the purpose has remained remarkably consistent.

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“I think that's why I’m proud to be a feminist,” she said, reflecting on an early lesson from her mother about standing up when something is unfair. It is a lesson that has followed her from Harlem to Rutgers, from social work practice to courtrooms across the country, and into the next generation of social workers who are continuing the work she helped pioneer.

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