

Roberta Kowald

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Statement of Purpose: Evergreen State College: Master of Public Administration 2023

When my children and I were living in our third Homeless shelter in a year, someone asked me why, with my life crashing around me, I bothered to care about politics. I said, “because people in suits, who don’t know me, or my family or anything about us, make decisions that impact our lives every day.”

But in many ways that is starting the story in the middle.

I come from a long line of activists. From my Scottish ancestors riding into battle “with a bible on one hand and a sword in the other” to my cantankerous and vehemently anti-slavery great-great grandfather “Uncle Billy” Bowers who (legend has it) was one of only two people in the state of Georgia to vote for Abraham Lincoln in 1860. My mother was one of the first female news producers at NBC in the 1950’s. Boycotting in our house was commonplace and it was years before salad appeared on our dinner table because of her support of Migrant farm workers.

I’ve often said that social justice and activism are, literally, in my DNA.

As a result, the program at Evergreen has become a goal for me. With Evergreen’s history of innovative teaching methods and promotion of “outside the box” thinking, I’m excited at the possibility of being a part of that.

My first foray into academia was to start my career in Law in Melbourne, Australia where I grew up. While still in school, I collaborated with friends to create a legal clinic for garment workers doing piecework in their homes. A notorious business rife with underpaid workers, intimidation, and oppression -many of the workers were women, often bound by cultural traditions to home and caring for their children at the same time. They were ripe for exploitation. It was not unusual for these women to be spied on by their employers to prevent them from getting help.

So, we devised an ingenious plan. We had a local medical clinic offer us space in the evenings so we could meet with the workers under cover of “just going to the doctor”. We were able to offer them pro bono legal assistance and later, when anti-sweatshop laws in Australia were expanded to cover in-home workers as well – the data and files we compiled became an important part of that legislative change.

But while my time as in the legal world taught me a lot, I realized it wasn’t the right “fit”. I didn’t want to simply follow the law – I wanted to challenge it, change it, and make new laws.

I decided to shift gears and go back to school and fell in love with Sociology and Social Research. I was able to work on research as various as developing links between systemic racism to the high suicide rates in the First Nations community to working on uncovering some of the very first indicators of prescription drug abuse.

Fleeing domestic violence saw me boarding a plane to the US with two children under five, \$700 in my pocket and only a vague idea of where we were going – a place called Yelm, WA where I knew some folks from Australia. I landed with no documentation other than my passport (No Social Security card, no

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credit history, and no rental history). I was starting from the ground up with no support and no family to help.

Fast forward to homelessness (despite working sometimes two and three low-wage jobs), sleeping in our car and in a church in Tacoma that let us rest on their pews at night. I learned that homelessness happens to people for all sorts of reasons – most of them not what people think. That tightly knit community took care of us, looked out for us and there were often gifts of small toys and treats left for my family (now numbering four). I began to truly understand what “privilege” means – as a white, native English-speaker with a Sociology degree I knew all the rights things to say to social workers so we could get services and I saw how easily people fall through the cracks or walk away in despair and frustration, deeming “the safety net” too impossible to navigate.

Pulling us out of that *“foul rag-and bone shop of the heart”* (to steal a line from Yeats) was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. But, as I once said in an interview – knowing “What it’s like being on the other side of the desk” led me to a long career in Government, Social Services, and Non-profit work – always fixed on creating programs and systems that make life better for people, helping them to find their own ladders and restoring their self-esteem.

My most recent position as a Legislative Coordinator and Management Analyst with the Division of Leave & Care at Employment Security has reminded me again that once upon a time, I chafed at simply following laws written by others and how much I enjoy the world of policy – making and shaping the laws and rules that change lives.

Importantly, Evergreen State College will be a valuable part of that goal. Not only will the high regard I see Evergreen MPA graduates given in Olympia and in the legislature and the positive impact this can have my career, but the opportunity to engage in rigorous academic work again with a team of professors very much after my own heart in a time of deep political and social divides – it’s a perfect convergence for me.

I also believe with my background, both academically and in life, I can bring a unique perspective to the work at Evergreen and become an asset to the College.

I thank you for your consideration.