

PracticesMadePerfect
by Linda L Lawless LMFT LMHC

It occurred to me when I was first starting out in private practice that I hadn't a clue about what I was creating. I had spoken to a few clinicians about their practices but only got bits and pieces of what a "Private Practice" was ALL about. Twenty-two years, two states and five practices later, I believe I have a clue. Now I would like to help other professionals better understand the commonalities and differences between successful professional practices.

Through this PracticesMadePerfect column, I will interview professionals I believe have practices that from their perspective are successful and fulfilling. The first practice I chose is Step Family Associates, founded by Judy Osborne MA, CAGS. LMFT, LMHC, CGP in Brookline.

I met Judy many years ago through MAMFT and worked with her to create continuing education events through the Metro Boston Professional Counseling Network. I've always been impressed with Judy's presence as a person. She is bright, warm and able to set good limits when asked to volunteer her time. I enjoyed doing this interview because it gave me an opportunity to get to know Judy better.

One of the things I should have already known, and discovered as we spoke, is that Judy is a self-starter. She likes to take good ideas and implement them. Her practice is one that is as good for the professional as it clearly is for her clients. Judy is licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist and Mental Health Counselor in Massachusetts and is nationally certified as a Group Therapist. After you read the interview below, check out the web site for Stepfamily Associates at www.StepFamilyBoston.com.

Interview:

LLL - Judy, how did you get into the counseling field?

JO - I started out as a guidance counselor working with families in schools. I started the elementary guidance program in Brookline, it was great, a really fun job. I knew I wanted to know more and went back to school at the BIP (Boston Institute for Psychotherapy) to get more training. I entered a doctoral program at Northeastern and later worked at McLean's alcohol and drug clinic where I started a program for adult children of alcoholics. I left McLean's in 1991. I had started seeing private clients in 1980 and Stepfamily Associates grew out of that.

LLL - Please describe your current practice.

JO - My practice is not very traditional. I don't see people weekly but base their visits on their own rhythm, be it weekly or every couple of months. I learned this approach in my own therapy. When I challenged the need to be there every week I was accused of not being serious about "the work," when it had nothing to do about my own needs but their need to create income.

My practice is about one third individuals, one third couples and one third groups.

Individuals contact me because they have had some experience with divorce, either as a child or an adult, or they have had experience with family alcoholism. Some stay for long periods of time and others leave after the initial problem has been relieved. With the longer term clients, the initial problem is resolved in a short amount of time and they become engaged in learning more about themselves and stay in therapy for years.

My couples work is usually fairly short term since they are mostly about step families. They are usually good functioning individuals but are having problems putting a step family together. I usually give them something that I have written, like my booklet "Stepfamilies: The Restructuring Process." After reading

that, they often feel relieved because they can reframe their experience as a normal one others go through. You can get information about it from my web page www.stepfamilyboston.com. I often ask the women to join a group for step families.

Most couples are seen about 1/2 a dozen times. This helps them begin working as a team and gives them a road map for the future.

I have one group that has met weekly for 18 years now. The longest term member has been there for 12 years. Another women's group has met monthly for 10 years. It has been the same five women all that time. There was an article in the AMHCA (American Mental Health Counselor Association) Advocate about this group. I also hold support groups for women and step families, which meets monthly. Members of this group generally stay for 3 years but most for 1-2 years.

Some clients come from very far away, Rhode Island and New Hampshire.

LLL - What drives you to keep going?

JO - Some have said I have made my work out of my life. I love helping people learn new ways of talking about things they would never before have spoken of before.

LLL - What else do you do

JO - I teach at the Brookline Center and in Cambridge through the MIT and Harvard work/family program.

LLL - How did you get into the work that you do?

JO - Through my personal experience of growing up in an alcoholic family. I learned about the loss of energy in this kind of family when you lived in it. Then I discovered new ways of thinking about myself. Later in life I married into a stepfamily. Now I can talk about these things because I don't carry the pain anymore. I have explored them personally and want to share what I know with others.

This approach doesn't feel like a boundary violation. There are certainly things I don't and can't talk about, but this personal information about myself I use as more of a confirmation for others that they can grow out of their pain. It's hard to include this approach in therapist training because they don't have the experience yet. That is why I believe peer supervision is so important as therapists grow in their work.

LLL - Do you still enjoy your work?

JO - Yes I do. I feel strongly about my work and feel like I can now be taken seriously. I've never been able to work well in institutions and have the recognition of that kind, but feel now my work is recognized by colleagues as valuable.

LLL - What is your office like?

JO - People describe it as "Grandma's attic." The chair that I use is my Father's chair, it was a wedding present to my parents. I recall him sitting in it when he was drinking. I have refinished it and the little table that sits next to it. It is very important to me that I have them. I feel like I am transforming them, that chair and the horrifying experiences I had in relation to that chair. I recall my sister sitting in that chair and remembering the terror that was in that family that took place around that chair. I have a lovely oriental rug that was my sisters who passed a few years ago. She was an excellent social worker that did not have a long time to practice before she died. I have two rocking chairs that I nursed my babies in and a lot of "choskies" around. I like the coziness of it. It is set in an office suite. I own a suite of offices in the building. It has been wonderful to have these offices that I can rent to other therapists. I have been able to help people get started and watched them grow and move on. (Judy is currently renting space to new and seasoned therapists.)

LLL - How do you grow your practice best?

JO - I get most of my referrals through my teaching and word of mouth.

LLL - What are your future interests?

JO - Someone said to me a long time ago that if you're going to get into something you need to think about how you are going to get out of it. I have thought about when the end of my practice would be and have decided it would be in 2010. Having that deadline allows me to put it into perspective and ask myself what I want to do between now and then. I don't know if I'll be a therapist after that.

LLL - What haven't I asked you that is important to know about you and your work?

JO - I believe there is a benefit to the profession for us to speak about how we have grown out of difficult life situations.

Another thing I find is important is to have a rich private life with lots of refreshment. It's not that I don't work hard it's that I enjoy what I do and structure time off to renew my spirit and my commitment to big chunks of time where I don't have anything on my calendar. In the beginning I had to look at my children's needs. Now that they are older I have more energy for myself and my work.

Judy was very generous in adding that if you have any questions about her practice or her work she would like to hear from you. You can send her e.mail at judyosborne@earthlink.net or give her a call at 617-731-5767

There were many more questions I had on my list to ask Judy, but wanted to quit before I wrote a short novel. I do wonder, in future interviews, what questions you would have about a successful practice. I am also looking for others who have a successful practice for future interviews. Please send me your ideas at Linda@PracticesMadePerfect.com.

Linda Lawless LMFT LMHC
www.PracticesMadePerfect.com
MAMFT Newsletter Editor