For the Fall 2016 version of Noteworthy, the year end publication for the UH Graduate College of Social Work, we asked Dr. Brené Brown to share her thoughts on the new Brené Brown Endowed Chair in the Graduate College of Social Work, her time spent at the GCSW, and the social work profession. A version of this interview is included in our year-end publication Noteworthy.

On the Brené Brown Endowed Chair:

With the success and popularity of your work, you must have had many options for selecting an academic home. Why did you choose the GCSW? The University of Houston is the most racially and ethnically diverse research university in the United States, and the GCSW reflects this and is deeply committed to inclusivity. It’s a privilege to walk into a room and see a group of students who reflect the world. I learn more from them than I could ever teach.

What kinds of opportunities will the endowment create for students? For expanding your research?
I will never forget receiving the call about the Huffington Endowed Chair. I’m deeply grateful, and it still feels a little overwhelming. Every semester, I get emails from doctoral students who are interested in studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. These resources will give students the opportunity to work on our team as we drive to bring this work to the world. Right now we’re working in education, the nonprofit and public sectors, and the corporate sector. Our MSW internship program is one of my favorite efforts. We’re dedicating considerable resources to the program right now in order to create meaningful experiences for our interns and for the clients we serve through the program.

Are there qualities that social work students have specifically that will add value to expanding your research?
We have a team of twenty folks right now, and they are spread from Seattle to New York. We’re united by a strong culture that reflects the heart of our work. We ask that people show up, be brave with their ideas and their work, get comfortable with making and learning from mistakes, and share our passion for making the world a braver place. The rest we can learn together.

On Social Work and Research:

As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
A truck driver. I wanted my own CB radio.
When did you know you wanted to be a social worker?
I was a manager in corporate learning for AT&T, and my boss used to give me this feedback about trying to broker services for my team: “You’re not their social worker; you’re their team leader.” When I resigned to go back to school, she said, “Let me guess. You’re either going to become a social worker or a VJ on MTV’s Headbangers Ball.”

What drew you to social work?
The importance we put on meeting people where they are, our commitment to contextualized practice, and the call to have tough conversations about topics that matter. The world would be a better place if everyone had a little of our training.

Best thing about being a social worker?
Being able to find patterns and make connections between things that other people see as unconnected. Social work has taught me to understand the inextricable connection between micro and macro; among thought, behavior, and emotion; and among the social, political, and economic. Fortunately, social work also teaches us how to be okay with discomfort. Making connections and finding patterns is uncomfortable work.

What does social work research have to offer to the profession? To the world?
I think my work has resonated with the world for two reasons: accessibility and context. I went through my social work training during a period of time when we were taught that what we had to offer was an important and unique understanding of the world. Our journals didn’t have the same ratings or impact factors of the bigger psychology journals, but that wasn’t the point. Our goals were to meet people where they were, to offer a contextualized understanding of the world (versus one that pathologized people), and never to back down from hard conversations about race, gender, orientation, class, or age — all of the tough topics that we were taught to lean into. I was raised on Ann Hartman’s editorial “Many Ways of Knowing.” I’m not sure that I’d have my career today had the research pressures in my early years been what they are today. As social workers, we need to be very careful to stay out of comparison and never forget what we do well, why we do it, and whom we serve.

What, if anything, do you think will change about social work over the next five years?
We need to embrace fully who we are as a profession, what we do, why we do it, and setting our own goals for what success looks like. We don’t need to follow all of the rules
to earn professional respect. We’re trained to evaluate rules, break them when necessary, and write new ones that better serve the people we serve. That doesn’t mean less rigorous education standards. I think we should actually consider raising our learning and development standards while redefining what successful research and practice look like for our profession.

**What would the perfect social work tagline/bumper sticker say?**
You don’t have to do it alone. We were never meant to.

**What opportunities should MSW students and doctoral students in social work be sure to explore in preparation for the profession?**
Communication. We need to make sure that every BSW, MSW, and PhD student can effectively and efficiently communicate their ideas. I’m talking about strong writing and debate skills and persuasive presentation skills. They should be able to put together a beautiful PowerPoint deck and present an idea in less than 15 minutes. Social workers have something important to say; we should be training them how to say it in a way that is in alignment with how people communicate today.

**What do you remember most about your time at the GCSW? What should others know about the College?**
What comes to mind when I think about my time at the GCSW is curiosity, passion, fierce debate, and exploration. I’m not sure we knew what we were going to do once we graduated, but we didn’t squander one minute of being fully immersed as grad students. We protested, had community dinners, pulled all-nighters, staged a sit-in, fought with each other about political issues, and went to movies together. I worked, went to school full time, and had my internship. It was exhausting and exhilarating.

**On the Brené Brown:**

**If you could be or do anything else, what would you choose?**
Something creative that required a deep understanding of fonts. I really love fonts.

**Anne Frank once said that in spite of everything, she believed people were basically good. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?**
I absolutely believe people are good. We’re just dangerous when we’re in fear.

**“You can’t live the rest of your life worried about what other people think.” What has replaced the worry in your life today?**
I want to be a good leader, and that’s incredibly hard work. It’s not so much that I worry about it, but I am constantly thinking about how I’m showing up with people. Especially under pressure.

**What might someone be surprised to know about you?**
I’m extremely introverted. I don’t mind being on stage because it’s my work, but I don’t like big social gatherings, and I’m not good at “meet-and-greets.” I need lots of alone time, and I’m most comfortable in small groups or with people I know. Small talk is very draining for me. My energy comes from being alone or with my family or with a small group of folks having meaningful conversation.

**Favorite Things:**

**Favorite movie (of all time):**
I’ll always stop for *THE SOUND OF MUSIC*.

**Favorite song:**
I’m really into music so I can’t pick one. If I’m struggling I’ll probably turn to The Rolling Stones or “The Delta” by Crosby, Stills, and Nash.

**Best/favorite book about social work:**
Favorite article is definitely Ann Hartman’s editorial “Many Ways of Knowing.”

**Favorite quote:**
“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” –Howard Thurman

**Favorite snack:**
Topo Chico

**Guilty pleasure:**
BBC television

**Best/favorite thing about Houston:**
We are a microcosm of the world. We care about each other. We believe in hard work. GREAT restaurants.