

Who is David French?

By Aria Allen

For confidentiality reasons, the names and locations of the clients and shelters mentioned by David French remain anonymous.

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David French is in middle school. Not in middle school, he reminds himself, but a social worker working with middle schoolers.

Trying to, at least.

A group of boys talks about something other than the assigned groupwork. Another clowns around. He's repeatedly asked both to refocus themselves.

French takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger.

He's already worked his shift at shelter Z from 12 a.m. to 8 a.m. Now he's at Lowes Grove Middle School from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. and then comes the data collection afterwards from 10:15 a.m. to 11 a.m., then his coaching meeting at 1 p.m., then his supervision meeting at 3 p.m.; then nine hours of classes from 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday with a meeting during his 2-hour break; then teaching at the middle school again on Wednesday followed by his remote research assistantship; then remote data analysis all day on Thursday—

Friday is drowned out by the overwhelming surge of noise and bright lights and movement.

He closes his eyes to swim, to remember why he does this—never-ending days with never-ending work—why he's passionate about social work, why he's doing this at all.

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David French is eight years old.

He's in the back seat of his dad's white Honda Civic, bored as he waits for his father. He wiggles towards the front seat, fingers clutching whatever they can find. His fingers push at the sunglasses compartment above him and grab the small, sealed bottle within.

While he doesn't know what it is, he knows he shouldn't have found it. He puts it back and says nothing to his father. He says something to his mother, who tells him not to worry about it and he doesn't until much, much later.

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David French is 22 years old. He now knows that small, sealed bottle was a shooter and that his mother worried about it for him.

Like the shooter hidden in the sunglasses compartment, French's father hid his alcoholism from his children: arguments, visits restricted to every other weekend, and a divorce were signals of an underlying issue, but not one French understood at eight years old.

Although his father struggled with alcoholism, he didn't struggle with being a good father—he was "...always a great dad, always there [for French and his brother]." Understanding the humanity and duplicity of substance abuse—a person's ability to fulfil one role while failing in another—pushed him towards a career of healing, of mending pain like the way rehab and his father's nine years of sobriety have mended his family's.

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David French is a white man.

"Can I stall for five minutes?" he jokes with a cheeky smile when asked to explain the relationship between his career as a social worker and privilege as a white man.

"Are you conscious of your white privilege?" I ask.

"Very," replies French. The main demographic of social workers is white, albeit white women. He understands that as a man "I understand I get a bunch of privilege." This includes professors remembering his name in class, but not those of his female peers around him. He paints a career in "social work as earned [credibility]," but doesn't elaborate on how his privilege affects earning credibility within the hierarchy of the field.

"As a white man, what is your biggest privilege in social work?" I ask.

As a social worker, French says sometimes clients see him as "more trustworthy and providing more diligent services," thus presumably more competent than other social workers on staff who hold other identities.

"Do you see race, class, and gender?" I ask.

"Yes, but in the sense of inequalities and marginalized communities," French specifies. The three are tools of oppression within society whose effects are seen daily. To him, "People are individuals without identities," although he recognizes the intersectionality between their identities and oppression. He works daily to unlearn his implicit biases.

"What does white supremacy look like in social work?" I ask.

"Programs can be selective about areas they want to work with," French admits, meaning they cater to a specific demographic within those areas. Their methods can be as nuanced as taking a specific number of clients from that area or as obvious as staffing white social workers to help with a client demographic of mostly nonwhite people.

"Why does you being white matter?" I ask.

"I'm anti-white male, specifically anti-white, cisgender, wealthy, older men of European descent with generational power and privilege. As a white man, I feel embarrassed [by them]," French reveals. White men in his field "know" being white matters but aren't required to discuss or attend trainings that discuss the intersectionality between their privilege and their work.

"What do you think about race-based trainings and white privilege trainings?" I ask.

“Yes, I agree with them,” nods French. They’ve only been incorporated at one shelter, although it was just a discussion about diversity and not inclusivity and anti-implicit bias training. Within his master’s program at UNC, there’ve been more resources dedicated to this subject.

He exhales after the last question, grateful it’s over but happy to have discussed one of his “favorite things to talk about [white privilege within the field of social work].”

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David French is “a social worker,” then, “a community organizer,” and finally, “a social work student who specializes in substance use tendencies in unhoused communities.”

To understand his roles is to understand the language he uses: use “unhoused” instead of “homeless”; “unhoused person” rather than “homeless person”; “empathize” versus “sympathize.” He uses language that cultivates a culture of respect between himself and his clients, or the “unhoused people” mentioned above. This language is stripped of the stigma, biases, and condescension their alternate implies.

Above all, “unhoused,” “unhoused person,” and “empathize” cultivate a sense of togetherness between unhoused communities and housed communities, that these are people experiencing the same systemic issues as us, but in a more extreme context.

These issues include inflation, the augmentation of rent and housing prices, and the “capitalistic regime” we live in.

His conversation with a colleague in construction reveals a mentality of “Why build to lose money?” within the construction industry regarding investing in affordable housing. Building homes for housed people wanting homes instead of unhoused people needing them is also reflected by the struggles of “rapid rehousing programs.”

In short, rapid rehousing programs matched unhoused people—known to social workers as “clients”—with a case manager to find affordable housing. Due to the “policies that regulate them” and the economy, these programs struggle to find sustainable housing.

We see this in Chapel Hill as well, French says. With “affordable” rent found by these programs between “\$400-\$500 and the average rent between \$1100-\$1400,” it’s obvious “the affordable housing isn’t affordable”.

French tries to remind himself that when dealing with “a nasty nonprofit industrial complex that doesn’t work,” it’s important to “take it case by case” and remember he’s fighting the system by fighting for, and with, the people disenfranchised by it.

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David French is a fighter.

He fights for mothers, fathers, children, and families; for teenagers and adults; for women, men, nonbinary, and gender queer people; for immigrants and refugees; for black people, brown people, Hispanic people, Latinx people, indigenous people, and white people.

For the client who shows him how to take apart and reassemble a bike in 30 minutes.

For the client who spits at him, “You’re just helping me because you’re paid to.”

For the client who begs him, “Go get me a dangerous weapon so I can kill myself,” to which he replies, “It would be a shame to lose a friend.”

He fights for the faces we stare at around us every day and the face we stare at in the mirror every night:

He fights for us.

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David French is at shelter Y, a dark building where hope has faded from its pale walls. Defeat permeates the tables around him: hunched shoulders, hands digging into cheekbones, gloomy stares into nothingness. Some stand silently as food is served onto their plate before shuffling back to their seat.

He feels helpless, overwhelmed by the depression that hangs over the room in clouds of dim lighting and falls in faint streaks of light onto the faces below.

A man stands. He clears his throat and begins singing, his voice shattering the stillness around him. It falls into the ears of the others, piercing the hopelessness around him as people stand and shift in their seats to join in.

The walls brighten with every clap, its colors with every hum; happiness shines within faces, joy flushes cheeks red, and the entire room sounds like hope as people lose themselves in the music.

After a few moments the man stops singing and the people stop clapping, but hope remains in the eyes of those around him, glinting in the faint streaks of light.

It also lives on in French as a memory of seeing the hope he feels for his clients as a social worker felt by his clients themselves.

The melody fades and French opens his eyes as he resurfaces, smiles at the middle schoolers around him, and speaks.

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