

# MOSAICS

Spring 2023

## Why we need more perinatal social workers

By Matthew Biddle

**M**allory Ferland, MSW '22, has stood beside new parents at the worst moment of their lives.

Before coming to the UB School of Social Work, she volunteered with Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, a nonprofit that helps parents heal after the loss of a baby.

"It was my first experience working directly with social workers," she says. "I realized I wanted to do more with the birthing population, and that's ultimately why I joined UB's social work program."

For her advanced year field placement, Ferland interned with WNY Postpartum Connection (WNYPPC), a volunteer-run nonprofit that aims to improve access to perinatal mental health services.

Founded by three social workers, WNYPPC began as a resource directory in 2017; now, it helps link people to support groups, hosts community events and has built an extensive network of therapists and providers. When individuals reach out for support, the organization taps into that network to find a provider who can assist.

"When you're in the throes of postpartum depression, making several phone calls can be really hard," says Jennifer Urban, co-founder and co-director of WNYPPC, and a field educator and liaison for the School of Social Work. "We try to remove that barrier with a simple contact form, where someone can say, 'I need help.' We respond and engage with our network to connect them with a provider."



WNYPPC represents a major leap forward for perinatal mental health care access in Western New York — but gaps remain, both locally and nationally. There are too few Black and Indigenous providers. Services are limited for dads and anyone living in rural or low-income communities. Ferland often struggled to find providers that accept Medicaid or specific types of insurance.

"Birthing people make up about 50% of our population, yet their experiences and needs are often overlooked — and that's intertwined with reproductive justice and many other aspects of social work," Ferland says.

Urban agrees: "We know there are health disparities, and there's often a lack of trust in the mental health system. We need to build those relationships — build that trust — so people know help is available and they're not alone."

### The Maternal Health Crisis

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. maternal mortality rates surged 40% in 2021, partly because of COVID-19. The U.S. far exceeds other developed nations in maternal mortality — with stark racial disparities. Black

women are three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women.

In the White House's "Blueprint for Addressing the Maternal Health Crisis," Vice President Kamala Harris wrote: "Far too many women experience pain, neglect and loss during what should be one of the most joyous times of their lives." The document also acknowledged the key role that various providers play in the maternal health ecosystem — including social workers.

"Historically, social work had always done a lot with maternal and child health, but over the last 30 years, fewer and fewer social workers have been going into perinatal social work," says Robert Keefe, associate professor of social work.

"Social workers are trained to work in communities and systems of all sizes," Keefe continues. "As one mother told me, 'You can give me all the medication in the world — it's not going to stop the gunshots outside my apartment.' Without social workers, no one's addressing the environment where these mothers live and raise their children."

Keefe studies factors that lead to negative birth outcomes and works to improve the delivery of health care services, particularly to mothers of color. In one stream of research, Keefe heard a common refrain from low-income mothers with postpartum depression: "We don't have time to be depressed."

"That's a powerful statement," Keefe says. "But research tells us that mothers will make sure their kids' health is better taken care of than their own health, so we've been working with community health workers in WIC clinics,

# LEAPING Over BARRIERS

## MSW STUDENT WINS PRESTIGIOUS NASW FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP



By Matthew Biddle

Adam Fryer, a student in the School of Social Work's online MSW program, has been awarded the Verne LaMarr Lyons Memorial Scholarship from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Foundation.

Awarded to just six master's students nationwide each year, the scholarship recognizes students who demonstrate interest in or experience with health or mental health practice and a commitment

Fryer first earned his bachelor's degree in psychology from UB in 2011 and is now on track to complete his MSW this summer.

"The knowledge I've gained and the experiences I've had in the MSW program have changed me completely," says Fryer, who lives in Bellingham, Washington.

He points out the program's emphasis on cultural self-care: "Going into the master's program,

officers refer them to the program, rather than relying on arrest and incarceration. From there, case managers like Fryer can help them improve their lives by connecting them with necessary services and addressing the root of their issues.

"Our No. 1 goal is to help people get on their feet," Fryer says. "Because of their circumstances, someone may be stealing just to eat, but we can come in and help get their benefits activated, provide

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*"The knowledge I've gained and the experiences I've had in the MSW program have changed me completely."*

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to working in African American communities.

"I'm still in disbelief," he says of the award. "I will be the first generation in my family to get a master's, so it means a lot just to be in this program. This award really validates all the work I'm doing."

The scholarship will help Fryer continue working to achieve his dream of becoming a counselor. "I always resonated with that character in the movies — the person in the chair who always seemed to know the right things to say," he explains.

I thought about human services in the same way that an engineer might think about their work. Now, I understand it's more flexible and realize how much of yourself you put into this work — and how important it is to take care of yourself, too."

During his foundation year, Fryer completed an employment-based field placement with Whatcom County's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, where he works as a case manager.

LEAD reimagines how a community approaches public safety. When individuals with behavioral health issues commit low-level violations,

transportation to appointments and find them housing."

LEAD aims to address racial disparities in the criminal justice system, a mission that aligns with Fryer's own passion and life experiences. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, for example, Fryer was an activist organizer with The People's Peaceful Protest in Geneva, New York.

"The racial divide in access to resources is just so bad," he says. "Going forward in my career, I hope to have my own practice, so I can help people leap over those barriers and bring quality mental health services to people wherever they're at." •

## DEAN'S COLUMN

Welcome to the spring issue of Mosaics. As I write this, the campus is buzzing with eagerness, as commencement approaches and we celebrate our outstanding students for their achievements and scholarship. Soon, with their degrees in hand, the Class of 2023 will join social workers like you around the world in making a profound impact.

After college, my first professional role was with the Darlington County Department of Social Services in South Carolina. Our office would receive reports of parents in distress. As I investigated these issues, I mostly saw people doing their best and trying to figure out how to be there for their children. As a result, I established and



*"As social workers, we dedicate our time and expertise to empowering others every day."*

facilitated the county's first parent support group to provide these caregivers with the skills they needed to feel more confident in raising their children.

As social workers, we dedicate our time and expertise to empowering others every day. We help people build on their strengths and work through challenges — and, of course, we live our professional values, dedicated to honoring the dignity and worth of all those we meet. Given this premise, I must pause in solemn salute to the 10 Black lives lost last May 14. The one-year anniversary of the racially fueled massacre at Tops supermarket is upon

us, lest we forget that gun violence and racial hatred are ills that continue to plague our society.

As we valiantly work toward racial, social and economic justice, we break down barriers for marginalized populations across the spectrum. You will notice that theme woven throughout this issue in the experiences of our alumni, students and faculty.

Our cover story demonstrates how perinatal social workers improve the lives of pregnant people, children and families at a particularly vulnerable time. It also serves as a call to action for all of us to continue working to remove obstacles that limit access to mental health services for far too many.

On the West Coast, online MSW student Adam Fryer assists individuals who find themselves in the criminal justice system because of victimized circumstances. In Buffalo, Jack Kavanaugh, MSW '15, and his colleagues at GLYS WNY create safe and positive environments for LGBTQ+ youth.

You, our alumni and friends, play a critical role in helping us to empower students who will break barriers in their careers and communities. Consider the inspiring example of Greer Hamilton, MSW '16, BA '16, and Danise Wilson, MPH '14, whose generosity has built a community of students who seek to improve health outcomes for underserved populations. They created the Hamilton-Wilson Student Assistance Fund, which provides an annual



award and mentorship for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds in the MSW and MPH programs. Today, I invite you to invest in their vision and make a gift at [buffalo.edu/campaign/hamiltonwilson](https://buffalo.edu/campaign/hamiltonwilson).

Thank you for being a valued member of our school community, and for all you do to represent the social work profession to the highest standards.

In camaraderie and solidarity,

Keith A. Alford, PhD, ACSW  
Dean and Professor

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pediatrician offices and other agencies to provide services for mothers too.”

To integrate social work more into perinatal care, Keefe has been working to forge ties with other professions through his involvement with the American Public Health Association. In another positive development, he sees more mothers coming forward to share their mental health struggles and reduce the stigma around postpartum depression.

“Many women assume what they’re going through is a normal part of motherhood, as opposed to something that has adverse consequences on themselves and their children,” he says. “We’re beginning to see mothers acknowledge their experiences more. Instead of remaining isolated, they’ll reach out to one another for concrete needs — like a ride to an appointment — and lift one another up.”

### Engaging Dads

The Buffalo Fatherhood Initiative is working to build that same sense of community among dads.

Research shows **paternal involvement significantly impacts perinatal outcomes**, including reducing negative maternal health behaviors and lowering the risks of preterm birth, low birth weight, fetal growth restriction and infant mortality up to one year after birth. Conversely, infant mortality rates can be up to four times higher when fathers are absent during pregnancy.

Part of the Buffalo Prenatal Perinatal Network (BPPN), the initiative encompasses three programs, including school-based opportunities and a personal finance program in partnership with Say Yes Buffalo. Another program, called Nurturing Fathers, facilitates authentic conversations among participants and uses an evidence-based curriculum to help men develop skills, gain confidence as dads and build healthy relationships with their kids and partners.

“We’re in a society that sort of leaves fathers out, and the root of that is an expectation that fathers don’t care and aren’t involved,” says Christopher St. Vil, assistant professor of social work, who has worked with the program since its inception. “BPPN is trying to change society’s views and help fathers learn that if they get past these stereotypes and engage with their children, their entire family fares better.”

The organization has hosted multiple MSW student interns, who assist with



surveys and focus groups, client intake and program operations.

“One outcome we’re seeing is less household conflict,” says Antoine Johnson, Buffalo Fatherhood Initiative program manager. “In focus groups, guys talk about how they become better communicators with their partners and kids. There’s a lot of growth and maturity that happens as the guys bond and learn from the program.”

Moving forward, research shows that when fathers are involved in their kids’ lives, high school graduation and postsecondary education rates increase.

“There’s a role for social work here because a lot of dads want to be involved, but don’t know how some of the things they do influence the child’s development,” St. Vil says. “This is where social workers can help men to play outside of these gender roles and feel comfortable engaging in different activities.”

### Survivor Moms

For individuals with a history of trauma, perinatal social workers can be critical in helping them navigate their pregnancy, birth and postnatal periods. Often, social workers are embedded within clinics, ready to address mental health challenges as they arise.

“Pregnancy can trigger past trauma because so much of the experience of maternity care maps onto past psychosexual experiences survivors have,” says Mickey Sperlich, an assistant professor who teaches an **innovative course in infant mental health**. “Pregnancy can magnify things like post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety, so a social worker would help identify those triggers and come up with plans to cope.”

Sperlich continues: “Right now, there’s

an emphasis in research on birth trauma, or the birth itself being a traumatic experience. My research shows that people who have PTSD have a higher risk of experiencing birth as traumatic. More than that, many people **report medical mistreatment** during pregnancy. It’s a wake-up call to perinatal providers that we need to do better.”

Right now, Sperlich is training agencies on an intervention she co-created called the **Survivor Moms’ Companion**, which helps clients understand how trauma influences their well-being during pregnancy and teaches them how to advocate for themselves and navigate their maternity care experience. Sperlich recently pivoted to gun violence research as well, as new reports point to **homicide and suicide as top drivers of maternal mortality**.

Sperlich says more programs are needed to address health disparities in perinatal care, especially the racism that undergirds the experiences of Black women, who report being ignored or mistreated more than their white counterparts.

“We need more perinatal social workers and infant mental health specialists, and more screenings and interventions they can employ. We need to do more to translate trauma-informed and anti-racist principles into the perinatal space,” she says. “Nothing matters more to a child’s life than their parents’ mental health and well-being.” •

Do you work in a perinatal or related setting? Partner with us to host MSW student interns. For more information, contact our Field Education Office at [sw-field@buffalo.edu](mailto:sw-field@buffalo.edu).



# Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth in Western New York

BY CATHERINE DONNELLY

**J**ack Kavanaugh, MSW '15, has focused his career on supporting youth and building a solid foundation in nonprofit management.

"Service was just part of my life growing up," says Kavanaugh, who serves as executive director of GLYS Western New York Inc., which builds affirming cultures for youth of all sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. "I've been involved with GLYS in various capacities since I was a child — my mom, Barbra, was on the board of directors when I was in elementary school, although she may be known to more people as the first openly gay member of the Buffalo Common Council.

"The opportunity to take the helm of a historic organization in the community was extremely gratifying. I love this organization and the people I work

with," he says. "I am passionate about creating a future for LGBTQ+ youth where they can feel safe and affirmed."

Kavanaugh attended Goucher College in Baltimore, where he majored in religion with focuses on African American and women's studies. "I was lucky enough to study closely under Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, a leader in womanist and Black theology," he says. "Our work helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the systems at play that create levels of privilege and access in the United States."

Returning to Western New York, Kavanaugh began exploring career opportunities as an AmeriCorps VISTA member at Bennett High School. As he met more people doing the things he wanted to do, he realized that while their jobs were diverse, a common denominator among those individuals was a social work degree.

At the UB School of Social Work, he focused on developing a strong foundation while exploring various tracks. "Some of my favorite electives included 'Social Work with LGBTQ+ Populations' and 'Grief and Loss.' I am also appreciative of my experiences working in the community with Louanne Bakk and of course in my Interventions class with Sue Green."

Kavanaugh earned his LMSW after graduation and held several roles before accepting his current position with GLYS WNY.

"GLYS has been working with the LGBTQ+ community for nearly 40 years. While the name of the organization has shifted over time, the focus has not," he says.

The organization offers a variety of resources for parents and caregivers while also providing support and guidance to LGBTQ+ student clubs in more than 100 local schools.

In his role, Kavanaugh raises funding and supports the staff, who he says do the real work with a diverse population of children and teens in an ever-evolving LGBTQ+ community.

"My career path has given me the skills I need to effectively steward a strong nonprofit," he says. "I intentionally sought out opportunities to make sure I had a solid grounding in three areas: programming, fundraising, and organizational governance and operations."

In addition to his full-time job, Kavanaugh is a faculty liaison for the School of Social Work, providing support for students and their field partners.

"This role gives me an opportunity to connect with students and hear about their experiences, while learning about resources and agencies in our community," he says. "Increasingly, I've had the opportunity to work with remote students doing field placements downstate and it's been fascinating to hear about their experiences as UB students in New York City or Long Island."

He continues: "The face and reality of social work practice have shifted so much, and the School of Social Work has done a great job shifting with this new world of expectations and giving students opportunities for meaningful experiences in the field." •

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## A WHOLE NEW PERSPECTIVE

Last winter, a group of first-year students traveled to Costa Rica to learn about human rights, media advocacy and sustainability. It was all part of UB's new First-Year Global Experience program, which aims to expand access to study abroad opportunities and help students build community with peers across campus.

Laura Lewis, clinical associate professor and assistant dean for global partnerships in the School of Social Work, co-led the course. The experience was so successful that it'll serve as a model for future First-Year Global Experiences.

"This program really was very special to me and helped me gain a whole new perspective on life," says undergrad Jack Misenheimer. Read more at [socialwork.buffalo.edu/costa-rica](http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/costa-rica).



### Class Notes are now online

Read all about your fellow alumni and what they are up to these days. Visit [socialwork.buffalo.edu/classnotes-sp23](http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/classnotes-sp23).

Hello!