

# MOSAICS

Spring 2021

## Addressing the Many Costs of Social Isolation

By Jana Eisenberg

*“Social isolation is a silent killer—as dangerous to health as smoking. National and global health organizations have underscored the hidden, deadly, and pervasive hazards stemming from feeling alone and abandoned. Our challenge is to educate the public on this health hazard, encourage health and human service professionals to address social isolation, and promote effective ways to deepen social connections and community for people of all ages.”*

from the website of the Grand Challenges for Social Work, the flagship program of the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare (AASWSW)

In 2015, when the AASWSW added “eradicate social isolation” to its Grand Challenges, the issue was already a rising global concern. And, since part of the remedy for the current pandemic is “staying away from other people,” a.k.a., social distancing, the problem became even more exacerbated and glaring; social workers and gerontological scholars are taking note.

“Loneliness wasn’t even defined as a problem until the 19th century and industrialization. Loneliness—and social isolation—increased during the 20th and 21st centuries, said UBSSW Dean Nancy J. Smyth.

Connecting has become more challenging. Many older adults are not well-positioned to mitigate their feelings and experiences of isolation. The social work profession is working on how to approach the issue from intervention and practice viewpoints. We—as a society, as social workers, as families, communities and individuals—must find ways to improve it.

A 2020 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report found that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older feel lonely, and nearly one-fourth of adults aged 65 and older are considered socially isolated.

Many older adults are isolated, living by themselves, and looking for some type of interaction, concurred Louanne Bakk, a UBSSW clinical associate professor who is also the director of the school’s DSW program. “There are myriad negative and physical health outcomes linked to loneliness and/or social isolation—but few targeted interventions to help older adults who are aging in the community.

An intervention that was already becoming more popular is technology-based: smartphone and videoconferencing. Via these modes, grandparents—often in lieu of in-person visits even pre-pandemic—get a glimpse of their grandkids, catch up with their grown children, or touch base with friends. And now, it’s ever more pervasive.

The focus on and use of technology has also risen within social work education and practice; UBSSW partly fueled by faculty interest in the subject, and partly out of necessity—is part of that trend. In fact, virtual reality (VR) is so widely perceived as a key emerging technology that input from mandatory external reviewers of the school’s initial DSW program resulted in the requirement that all our DSW students purchase a

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VR headset; the primary motive for incorporating it is to help students envision how the technology might be used in the practice environment.

### A Study to Connect Through Virtual Reality

"I first learned about and became interested in VR through the DSW program nearly three years ago," said Bakk. "The experience was so enlightening—it gave a sense of social presence, of being in the same environment with other people.

"There had been only one study that looked at VR in relation to how it might improve older adults' emotional, social, and physical health and well-being, so we decided to conduct our own study,"



Bakk continued. "It is now funded and approved, and we're partnering with one of our DSW students, Emily Tooley, MSW '13, and the agency she works at, Catholic Health's LIFE (Living Independently for Elders) Program."

Tooley is excited about the study, especially since she observes isolation and its outcomes in clients regularly. "People experiencing social isolation exhibit more adverse health effects—obvious ones, like depression, but more physical and pain complaints, increased falls, or EMS calls," she said. "Some start to neglect themselves, and even ask to move to a care facility because they are so scared, lonely and alone."

The study, says Bakk, is an opportunity to see if VR can help to decrease those feelings. "VR doesn't replace social interaction," said Bakk. "But our study

technology partner, Rendeever, is a VR company with the express mission of 'overcoming social isolation through the power of virtual reality and shared experiences' for older adults. So we're eager to work with them."

Through Rendeever and similar companies/technologies, VR is already being used with older adults in senior living communities. It has initially been shown to reduce loneliness and improve mental health—and it does this, Bakk attests, by transporting them virtually, from the comfort of their chair or couch to a variety of settings and environments. She and her study team will work with older people living in their own homes, a new approach for Rendeever.

*“Many older adults are isolated, living by themselves, and looking for some type of interaction.”*

— Louanne Bakk

"The experiences you can have are so far-ranging," said Bakk. "You can 'take' a group to a concert or a museum where they can share the experience and talk to each other while they are there. They can visit Egyptian pyramids, or show others in the VR with them their childhood neighborhood! This creates sensations and allows them to share memories."

Support for Bakk's study comes in part from Trina Laughlin, MSW '98, who in addition to generously responding to the school's appeal for assistance to purchase equipment, is a practicing social worker who sees her clients directly, negatively impacted by social isolation.

"I now work in Florida with adults, mostly aged 65–90; maybe they've lost a spouse, or their friends have passed

on or moved away; social opportunities can dwindle vastly. I came to realize that for some, just talking with me during our appointments was enough of a treatment goal," said Laughlin. "Sharing our stories—maybe you were an artist, or loved to play tennis—is part of what we all need as human beings. It makes us feel vital; a 'part of.'"

In addition, said Laughlin, older people are a "goldmine"—a mother lode of experience as a "rich, valuable population of human beings." In past generations and earlier times, more emphasis may have been placed on caring for and connecting with our elders as embedded resources for younger generations—now, not as much.

### Looking to the Future

Bakk says that while individual experiences are important to examine, the issue has farther-reaching impacts beyond people's well-being. Policy needs to be addressed. "The additional medical/health care costs each year associated with loneliness and social isolation are in the billions," she said.

Tooley, Bakk's DSW student who will help with the Rendeever study, agreed, adding, "One of the things that makes a culture or society pay attention to any issue is the financial cost. The greater need for higher care levels can result in soaring healthcare costs," said Tooley. "With predictions that over the next 30 years, more and more people in this aging population will need more care and services, it's important to come up with new technologies."

From her perspective as outgoing dean (see Q&A p. 5), Smyth couldn't agree more, and it's an issue she intends to look at more deeply when she returns to her own research.

"From better design and more inclusion in things like communities, transportation, and technology, there are situations that practitioners are observing, and solutions that they are testing," she said. "I will note that 'loneliness' is very different than choosing to be alone, which people can do. I would love to see social isolation eliminated as a problem within a decade." ●



# DEAN'S COLUMN

It is with mixed feelings that I write my last Mosaics note to you as your dean. I have been on the school's faculty for over 30 years, serving in this wonderful, impactful position for over 16 of them. Now, per academic custom, I'm choosing to step down—to return to some of the things that being dean necessarily limits: connecting with students through teaching, conducting research to further my understanding, and resuming a deeper focus on my own work alongside colleagues and leaders in our profession.



As a school, we welcome fresh leadership to continue the work we have done to keep the school moving forward with excellence, innovation, and equity. (For a brief Q&A with Dean Smyth about her plans for the future, see p. 5.)

As usual, it is with pride that we present Mosaics to you, our committed and supportive alumni, community and friends. While it's still in an abbreviated format, the content reflects our work—the topics that intrigue or challenge us, and our successes. And, as always, we're eager to share all of this with you.

Our lead story's topic—social isolation and loneliness—has been on my mind greatly. The experience of the past year has exposed many cracks in our society. The challenges presented by social isolation, particularly in older adults, was one of them. (Story begins on the cover.)

Insidious racial and economic inequity are part of what I call the "triple pandemic"—and we are pleased to offer a brief story about one of our alumna; she is active in the important work of increasing equity. You'll meet Shatorah Donovan, JD '12, MSW '11, BA '07, chief diversity officer for the City of Buffalo. (Story to the right; for a more in-depth profile, please visit [tinyurl.com/shatorah-donovan](http://tinyurl.com/shatorah-donovan).)

It has been my honor to lead this school—to have had the trust and collaboration of so many of you. It is my firm belief that "leadership" in our field does not always have to be formal or codified—every social worker has the potential to be a leader in creating solutions for the future.

Nancy J. Smyth

## Virtual Interprofessional Forum a Success

→ On Nov. 5, students and faculty from the School of Social Work participated in annual fall forum held by the Office of Interprofessional Education (IPE); this year it was successfully held online. An impressive total of 887 students and 116 faculty participated in the daylong event, with small group sessions where students worked across disciplines on a case study. The featured speaker was Erie County Health Commissioner Gale Burstein, who gave



prerecorded remarks. Schools and programs represented included athletic training, counseling psychology, dental medicine, dietetics, management, medicine, nursing, nurse practitioner, occupational therapy, pharmacy, physical therapy, public health and social work.

Cassidy Malough, an MBA/MSW student, was one of the enthusiastic attendees; she agreed that the event was both successful and helpful:

"In the midst of a pandemic, the organizers did a good job. My facilitator was personable and ensured that everyone had a positive experience—while there were minor technical difficulties, they didn't take away from the overall success of the event. It would have been nice to have a brief session where everyone discussed the main points of the case before breaking out to smaller groups. I did miss the in-person elements of actually seeing—and networking with—other students who were participating. Through the IPE day, I gained insight into how other disciplines view and prioritize client care; hearing how other disciplines might approach the case opened my mind to options."



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# WHAT I'M UP TO



**A**s the second person in the relatively new role of chief diversity officer for the City of Buffalo, Shatorah Donovan, JD '12, MSW '11, BA '07, discovered a good foundation as she approached the job. Her background—including fundraising, and immigration and business law—enabled her to both shape the job to her interests and base her early actions on the mayor's agenda and her predecessor's groundwork.

The job entails responsibility for the oversight and implementation of the City of Buffalo Opportunity Agenda through strategies and tactics including economic inclusion, City contract compliance and monitoring, M/WBE certification, and contractual community benefit.

Working with various city departments, she's learned more about how "diversity" can be perceived. "It's my role to dignify people—and to help those who might think that 'diversity' might mean 'exclusion,'" she says. "Genuine connection" is key to being effective in her role. Donovan aims to be perceived as credible, authentic, and trustworthy; she relies at least in part on her social work background and education.

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## Shatorah Donovan, JD '12, MSW '11, BA '07

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Donovan was named a 2021 honoree by Buffalo Business First for its annual Inclusion Diversity Equity Awareness (IDEA) Awards. She is pleased with the acknowledgement, but notes that real-life results mean a lot to her too. "The greatest recognition is when someone says, 'What you did made a difference in my life,'" she said.

She always keeps at least part of her focus on her passion: economic inclusion and wealth-building in disinvested communities, and sees her daily job—and her mission to elevate individuals and community with intention—as ideal: "If what we do gives them the confidence to be bolder, to have more faith in their abilities...that is a dream job."

This summer she'll work with an interdisciplinary team of Social Impact Fellows students as they fulfill their short-term mission to come up with innovative solutions to existing problems.

"I'm excited to be part of this brilliant program," she said. "The SIF group's diverse perspectives, in combination with their creativity, technical and educational skills will open my mind. I learn so much about what's out there when I have interns. I want to focus on bias—dive deep into how we can bring awareness. How are we going to open minds, create future-forward environments?"

*For a more in-depth version of this profile of Donovan, please visit the school's website at [tinyurl.com/shatorah-donovan](https://tinyurl.com/shatorah-donovan)*

FAREWELL BUT NOT GOODBYE,

# Dean Nancy J. Smyth

In academia, deans of schools regularly move in and out of this crucial position; such changes are part of keeping a school administration healthy and functional. Our dean for over 16 years, Nancy J. Smyth, is doing just that now, wrapping up her time in the position she has occupied so capably.

She will segue directly into a sabbatical, another commonplace event in a working academic's life—a year off to refresh, regroup, and rebuild one's next area of focus (in Smyth's 30+ years at UB, she's taken exactly one). We are thrilled to have her return to her role as a faculty member and contributing scholar, and in the meantime, say, thank you for your service, well deserved, and we'll see you when you get back!

“I'm looking  
*forward*  
to being colleagues  
with faculty again.”

— Nancy J. Smyth



## Why are you stepping down now?

My passion is for creating and building things—the school is doing well now; my goal is to leave on a high note. Deans spend on average 5–7 years in the position, that's about what it takes to accomplish your goals. By that measure, I've stayed a long time, and I want to make sure I don't overstay my effectiveness.

## Is there a roadmap for the next dean?

The path has been defined towards excellence; the near-future is about what the next person brings. I hope they work with all stakeholders to build on the vision and shape the future of the profession and our society. And racial justice and equity need to be an important piece of what anyone does in social work right now.

## What plans do you have?

I haven't figured it all out yet, it's been a hard year to get much thinking time. I'll do a little decompressing, but I'll get bored if I don't move on!

I'm looking forward to being colleagues with faculty again. As I clean out my office, and plan for my sabbatical, I am asking myself what I want to do longer-term. I do want to mentor, teach, learn and participate in service, which you can't do as much of as dean.

My interests have shifted from my past focus on trauma and addiction, to larger professional leadership issues; such as how social work prepares for and shapes the future. This can include working across disciplines in a way that transcends their natural boundaries; the scholarly term for it is “transdisciplinarity.” As part of this, I'm focused on social innovation and technology for social good, including ensuring that technology promotes justice and equity.



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## UB SSW Alums Celebrate SW Month

→ This year's national Social Work Month (March) theme, "Social Workers Are Essential," is fitting all the time, and especially now, with the heightened awareness and experience of the array of health and societal issues brought about by the ongoing pandemic. That's one reason we were pleased to see this Instagram photo. Plus their upbeat attitude and the fact that these women paused their own vital contributions to document the moment—in their UB gear, no less. Natalie Geisbuesch, MSW '19 says, "We're celebrating Social Work Month AND Alma Mater Day at Highland Hospital in Rochester! All three of us are UB School of Social Work graduates, and we're all inpatient social workers on med/surg floors!"



L to R: Anne Smith, MSW '02, Geisbuesch, and Stephanie Seeber, MSW '19

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