

# MOSAICS



## Youth Mental Health in Crisis

*How social  
workers  
can help*

2

A Pioneering  
Professor

7

Talking Social  
Work on TikTok

9

From Lebanon  
to Buffalo

DEAN'S COLUMN



Welcome to another issue of Mosaics, now in a new and expanded format. We appreciate your thoughts and feedback at [sw-mosaics@buffalo.edu](mailto:sw-mosaics@buffalo.edu).

If there's one theme I wish to share with you today, it's this: Stay the course. Amid challenging times, as injustice and questionable practices fill our thoughts and screens, it's easy to be swayed by distraction. However, we must press onward to champion inclusion, live our values, and uphold the dignity and worth of humankind.

This summer, the nation celebrated the 60th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. "Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice," King declared during the historic March on Washington in 1963. Since then, we have made great strides as a society toward equity and inclusiveness, but we must also reckon with the fact that King's dream remains unfulfilled.

People of color still often face prejudice in everyday interactions, and unconscious bias remains embedded in systems throughout American life. These experiences are traumatic and can have a ripple effect. We must continue to bolster our racial and social justice efforts — doing so with special attention on our youth, who are not only our future leaders but our present-day trailblazers as well.

Despite what we see occurring in parts of the country, we cannot erase history or camouflage atrocities. As social workers and citizens, we have a responsibility to nurture our young people through educating them about the past and lighting a pathway forward that uplifts humanity. They

deserve to know the facts of history, so that their justice efforts will build on previous ones dedicated to eliminating discrimination and advancing the strengths of diversity.

As you'll read in our cover story, we are facing a crisis around youth mental health in the United States, and social workers are needed to spread awareness, connect families to critical resources, and change systems from a macro perspective.

It's a daunting task, but one in which I'm confident our alumni, students, faculty, staff and community will play a key role. I'm inspired by the example of recent graduates Jessica Al Kadi and Justine O'Brien, who are profiled in this issue, as well as other alumni who return to the school as mentors and volunteers. I'm also inspired by our faculty and staff, like Susan Green and her team from our Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care, whose work is shifting the culture in several school districts. Likewise, Annahita Ball is making a positive difference through her leadership and research on this issue.

Together, let's redouble our efforts to best support the youth we serve. More than anything, let's help one another to stay the course in our quest to fulfill Dr. King's dream and work for the betterment of society.

In camaraderie and solidarity,

Keith A. Alford, PhD, ACSW  
Dean and Professor

MOSAICS

The magazine for alumni and friends of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work

Matthew Biddle, *Director of Communications and Marketing*  
Sarah J. Watson, *Associate Director of Communications*  
Destiny Rust, *Graduate Assistant*  
Design: iDesign, Joseph Galanti  
Photography: Onion Studio, Dylan Buyskes  
Proofreading: G&A Services Inc., Ann Whitcher Gentzke

For an electronic version of this publication, visit [socialwork.buffalo.edu/mosaics](http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/mosaics).

Address changes and other correspondence can be sent by email to [sw-mosaics@buffalo.edu](mailto:sw-mosaics@buffalo.edu) or by mail to: Editor, Mosaics, University at Buffalo, School of Social Work, 685 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260.



ON THE PODCAST

School social work: perception and reality

**"Don't be afraid to have a voice. Advocate for yourself. If you have ideas, get involved. Eventually, people will hear you and understand."**

— Stephanie Stodolka, LMSW, director of social-emotional learning at Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School

On a recent episode of inSocialWork®, Stodolka joined Alyssa Ernst, MSW '10, LMSW, a school social worker in the Cheektowaga-Sloan Union Free School District, to discuss common misperceptions of school social work — and give an informed heads-up to anyone considering a career in this area.

Listen now at [inSocialWork.org](http://inSocialWork.org).

GOOD NEWS

A pioneering professor



The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has named Diane E. Elze, associate professor emerita, an NASW Social Work Pioneer, one of the profession's highest honors. Elze was inducted this fall in recognition of her enduring impact on LGBTQ+ youth.

Among other pioneering contributions, Elze co-founded several queer advocacy and support organizations in Maine — where she began her career — including Outright Portland, the state's first queer youth support and advocacy group. As a founding board member of the Maine Lesbian/Gay Political Alliance (now Equality Maine), Elze helped establish the state's oldest and largest LGBTQ+ political advocacy organization.

After shifting into academia, Elze focused her research on LGBTQ+ youth and human rights, among other topics. In 2005, she joined UB, inspiring a generation of students and helping to propel the School of Social Work forward. She retired last year after 17 years of dedicated service.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Unlocking resources to support recovery



A multidisciplinary team led by Elizabeth Bowen, associate professor of social work, has developed and tested a new assessment tool that can potentially help people recover from alcohol and drug addiction.

The Multidimensional Inventory of Recovery Capital (MIRC) is a reliable measure of recovery capital, or the resources that support or hinder an individual's successful recovery. Published in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, the project was funded by a \$408,000 grant from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Individuals can use the MIRC to self-assess their own recovery capital, while clinicians and social workers can use it to better support their clients. The MIRC is also being used by researchers and integrated into larger systems, including the HealthCall care delivery platform.

Learn more and download the MIRC at [socialwork.buffalo.edu/mirc](http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/mirc).

# It takes a village

BY MATTHEW BIDDLE

*Addressing the youth mental health crisis at all levels of practice*



**Y**outh mental health is in crisis.

Sadly, that statement is not hyperbole, but rather a fact declared by several medical associations and reinforced by data from schools and hospitals nationwide.

In 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association declared a national state of emergency in children's mental health. According to these organizations, rates for youth mental health concerns and suicide rose steadily from 2010 to 2020 — when COVID-19 pushed the crisis over the edge.

The AAP reports that half a million children are evaluated in emergency departments each year for mental or behavioral health concerns. Studies show the pandemic led to increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression among kids. Last year, the National Center for Education Statistics found 7 in 10 public schools have seen an uptick in students seeking mental health services.

"Adolescent mental health has been a concern for decades now," says Annahita Ball, an associate professor in the School of Social Work, whose research focuses on educational justice and youth well-being. "We've always underdiagnosed children's mental health needs, and there's consistently been a gap between those who need services and those who have access to services.

"So, the conditions were in place for this to become a crisis, and then COVID really tipped the scales," she explains. "The social isolation that came with COVID was huge

for kids. There was a lot of fear, not knowing what was happening or having family members who were sick. For some kids, school was their safe place, and they faced more adversity being home and not being able to escape."

Ball says a lack of providers across the country has exacerbated the crisis. In August, The Washington Post reported that it would take tens of thousands of additional school social workers, counselors and psychologists to meet current needs.

"Since COVID, we've seen a diminishing workforce in mental health, as many people left the field because of the pay or work conditions," Ball says. "Often, school social workers feel like they don't have anyone to connect with. Providers are overloaded with long wait lists, and it's especially hard to find providers that offer culturally relevant services."

## Identifying priorities

With a crisis of this magnitude, how do you even begin to move the needle? Ball recently chaired the Western New York School Mental Health Task Force to answer this question.

Supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health to UB, the task force brought together experts from several school districts and universities — including School of Social Work PhD candidates Megan Bailey and Candra Skrzypek — to identify local priorities for enhancing school mental health services. (For all recommendations, visit [socialwork.buffalo.edu/schoolmentalhealth/](https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/schoolmentalhealth/).)

Now, Ball is using those priorities to guide her work with Erie 1 BOCES

to advance school-community partnerships that improve youth mental health.

"The thing that could make the biggest impact is improving the community infrastructure to support families and children around mental health," Ball says. "A school could be operating really well, but if there's no one to provide more intensive services for families, it's not going to happen."

Ball points to family support centers as a best practice in this regard.

Joey Cicatello, MSW '21, serves as director of community support services at Charter School for Applied Technologies (CSAT) in Buffalo and leads its Family Support Center to enhance student well-being through collaboration with families and the community.

"During COVID, students missed out on socialization and co-regulation, so now we see that social-emotional and behavioral support is just as important as pedagogy and academics," he says. "Students come to school to learn academics, but it's so much more than that."

Cicatello provides individual, group and family counseling, conducts home visits, helps families navigate public systems, and connects them to community resources, including housing.

"We not only look at the whole student, but also their environment and how that contributes to their success or the barriers they face," he says, noting that CSAT has behavioral health specialists, counselors and social workers embedded in each of its three buildings.

CSAT's focus on the "whole student" resonates with Jamali Moses, a DSW student and field educator



*“A child is not just a student. They are part of many systems — their family, school, after-school programs — and everyone in those systems influences their well-being.”*

— JAMALI MOSES, LCSW, DSW '24

who has been a school social worker for 17 years. Her school, Humanities Preparatory Academy, was the first school in New York City to implement restorative practices; today, Moses coordinates its restorative justice program, along with other duties.

“A child is not just a student. They are part of many systems — their family, school, after-school programs — and everyone in those systems influences their well-being,” Moses says. “If you can engage with those systems, it helps students see that you have a deep interest in them and develop trust with you, and it helps you understand who the student is in different arenas of their life.”

Consider the outgoing student who’s withdrawn at home, or the disruptive class clown who responsibly “parents” their siblings at home. Without examining a child’s life outside academics, Moses says, it’s difficult to provide proper supports.

Moreover, Moses points out that the youth mental health crisis has not hit all communities equally. White and Native youth have the highest rates of suicide among all youth, yet Black youth suicide rates are increasing faster than any

other racial group, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“COVID was traumatic collectively for all of us,” Moses says. “But the disparities among students played out during quarantine. For some students, going remote wasn’t a big deal because they had the technology and Wi-Fi access. Other students did not, so even academically, our students came back at different places depending on how engaged they were during quarantine.”

### Thinking big

Another effect of COVID that Helena Rankin, MSW '02 — a school social worker in Dunkirk, New York — has observed is kids’ attachment to their devices and social media. Amid the pandemic, their academic and social lives moved online, and today, bullies and other dangers can follow them there.

Rankin says schools must understand kids’ tech usage and meet them in digital spaces. For example, QR code stickers posted throughout her school direct kids to mental health resources. She recently piloted an app that asks students to rate how they feel each

day and sends automatic alerts to her for kids who might need a check-in.

Support from leadership is critical to funding initiatives like these and sustaining a much-needed focus on mental health in schools.

“Sometimes, I feel like I’m on an island because I don’t really make decisions higher up; I can only suggest things,” Rankin says, noting that she’s fortunate to be one of nine social workers in her small district.

“Turnover is a huge issue, though,” she continues. “You feel like you’re making progress with a new program or agency collaboration, and poof — suddenly, you have to start from scratch with new administration or new people in the community.”

That’s why PhD candidate Candra Skrzypek, MSW '17, argues for a macro-level approach to improve services or policies within schools, communities and beyond.

For her research, Skrzypek developed a scale to measure teachers’ understanding and training around youth mental health. For her dissertation, she’s looking at how school-level factors — like the suspension rate, poverty



rate and racial demographics — affect referral rates for mental health services.

“We need to look at how we recruit and retain mental health professionals, but we’re not going to solve the mental health crisis by just putting more one-on-one counselors in schools,” she says. “What can we do at the school level to influence student well-being? That might include implementing more equitable practices, looking at restorative justice, having culturally responsive curriculums and making sure school is an inclusive environment for students of color and LGBTQ+ students.”

### Preparing the future

Here at UB, the School of Social Work continues to educate future social workers who will be part of the solution at all levels — from micro-level work in schools and agencies to setting policy in districts or governments. Many alumni work in schools, and many more work in other settings that serve youth and families, thus contributing to the community infrastructure Ball identified as a critical need.

Even before graduating, students can make a positive impact on young people through fieldwork. The School of Social Work has fostered a growing number of partnerships with public, private and charter schools, early childhood centers and schools that serve unique populations, like Buffalo Public School 84, which is part of Erie County Medical Center and educates kids with significant health challenges. Last year, 75 students completed field placements at 46 schools or school-based programs.

As clinical associate professor in field education, Michael Lynch, MSW '10, serves as UB’s liaison to schools for field education. He says schools provide excellent training ground for MSW students to master basic social work skills and learn how to navigate complex systems. In addition, social work interns help run critical programming with partners like community food banks.

At center, ITTIC co-directors Samantha Koury and Susan Green with Ken-Ton’s Bettymarie Sullivan, MSW '02, and Susan Sperrazza, MSW '04. PHOTO: ONION STUDIO

## Shifting the culture in Ken-Ton Schools

Trauma-informed educational practices are now infused into every aspect of the Kenmore-Tonawanda School District’s culture — thanks to a partnership with our Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care (ITTIC). Over the past six years, ITTIC worked with district leaders and educators to develop and implement an action plan to make it the first trauma-informed school district in Western New York.

The partnership also is a model for ITTIC’s work in other districts, including Frontier, Lockport, Niagara Falls, North Tonawanda, West Seneca and Williamsville.

To start, ITTIC provided “Trauma 101” training for teachers, staff and administrators to increase their understanding of trauma and how it can affect people.

“When individuals have that awareness, it positions them to use universal precautions, or to consider how someone could be triggered or retraumatized by your environment, procedures or the way you do business,” says Susan A. Green, clinical professor and ITTIC co-director.

Next, each school formed a champion team to lead culture change in their building and develop strategies for



As more schools direct funding to social-emotional supports, some students have even been hired by their placement site after graduation, Lynch says.

“A school-based placement is really a crash course in many things students learn in the classroom,” Lynch says. “They see the impact of trauma or how policy affects the school climate and what students learn. Then, they can intervene by working directly with students or at the mezzo or macro level by helping to run programs that impact the entire school.” ●

concrete actions in classrooms and operations, with ITTIC providing guidance and tools along the way. Last year, Ken-Ton rebranded the teams as social-emotional learning implementation teams, which increased staff participation and has positioned the district for long-term success.

“The engagement level for this initiative has been the highest I’ve seen in my 21 years in the district,” says Michael J. Huff, principal at Hoover Elementary. “ITTIC has helped cause change in our district that has been very powerful and impactful.”

# Talking social work on TikTok

BY MATTHEW BIDDLE

**“Hi** friends, let’s talk about DARN-CAT,” Justine O’Brien, MSW ’23, says to the camera. “And, no, I don’t mean these darn cats,” she continues, the view switching to show two adorable felines swatting at each other.

Welcome to the TikTok channel O’Brien created for her field education site, Sage Training and Consulting. During this video, she educates viewers – more than 1,500 and counting – on an approach counselors can use with motivational interviewing to elicit change talk from their clients.

“The letters in DARN-CAT stand for different types of change talk: desire, ability, reason, need, commitment, actuation and taking steps,” O’Brien explains.

With a focus on motivational interviewing (MI), Sage Training and Consulting is co-owned by Todd and Melanie Sage, current and former School of Social Work faculty members, respectively. O’Brien chose the firm for her advanced year field placement both because of the support she received from Todd during the MSW program, as well as her expertise with using MI as a Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC).

“Motivational interviewing can be used in so many different settings,” O’Brien says. “We’re asking the client to be in charge of creating their goals, with us there to guide them with open-ended questions and reflections. MI empowers people and gives them

the autonomy to find their own motivation for change.”

The idea for a TikTok channel came from O’Brien’s personal obsession with the platform, as well as a desire to spread awareness about the firm’s services and MI more broadly.

**“We all have knowledge that’s important to share and an ethical responsibility to give back to our community.”**

“We wanted to help other social workers and not be gatekeepers for this information,” O’Brien says. “We all have knowledge that’s important to share and an ethical responsibility to give back to our community.”

In three months, O’Brien recorded about 50 videos on various aspects of MI, as well as subjects like self-care, breaking down stigma and decolonizing social work. All are packed with information, while a few tap into viral trends and pop culture, with music from Snoop Dogg and an appearance from Darth Vader. In total, O’Brien’s TikToks for the company have amassed roughly 23,000 views.

After wrapping up her fieldwork and completing her MSW, O’Brien stayed on at Sage Training and Consulting as a motivational

interviewing trainer; for one contract, she’s training child welfare workers across Virginia to use MI in their work. She also teaches “Addiction and the Family” as an adjunct instructor for the School of Social Work.

O’Brien says her passion for helping others stems from her own lived experiences, witnessing mental health struggles and addiction in her family.

“Because of what I’ve been through, I always knew that I could use that as a way to help and relate to others,” she says. “My experiences have made me a stronger social worker.” ●



Photos courtesy: Justine O'Brien

# 5 reasons social workers should embrace social media



BY JUSTINE O'BRIEN, MSW '23, CASAC

We live in a world that is mostly online. For many of us, even our jobs have moved online and away from a formal office. We can stay connected when we’re so far apart by embracing social media – and not just in our personal lives.

Here’s why you should use social media professionally:

**1 As a social worker, you can reach new audiences by embracing different platforms** – and there are many to choose from. Using Facebook, TikTok, Twitter or LinkedIn, social workers are now reaching people from across the world unlike ever before, and we’re loving it.

**2 You can help #StompOutStigma around mental health and substance use disorders with a few clicks of a button.** Organizations like the Trevor Project and To Write Love on Her Arms often rely heavily on social media campaigns to raise awareness. As social workers, we can be a voice for all by liking, commenting and sharing our own stories.

**3 You can be creative and authentic!** Social media allows social workers to be creative in ways we haven’t been in the past. There are TikTok channels devoted to social workers sharing new evidence-based practices and other insights and knowledge – and having fun while doing it. Now, outsiders can see social workers as real and human, and we can hopefully draw more people into the field.

**4 During a crisis, you can immediately share resources, advocate for community needs and offer practical support.** For example, you can jump on Facebook or Twitter to share information on organizations offering support or organize a relief effort yourself. Social media was incredibly useful following the 2022 Buffalo mass shooting, with local social workers leading the way in offering support and resources quickly.

**5 You can find supports of your own.** Using websites like LinkedIn, you can find new jobs, post your résumé, meet peers and find new mentors. You can also share what you’re doing professionally, including upcoming publications or presentations. Social media helps keep social workers connected, which became especially important during the pandemic.

If you’re on social media, be mindful of ethical considerations and maintaining boundaries. Check privacy settings to ensure you’re sharing content only with those who you mean to, and be aware that once something is on the internet, it’s there to stay.

Social media is a great tool that allows social workers to reach a large audience, destigmatize mental health, show off our creative sides, engage in meaningful crisis response and build our support network. Let’s embrace social media, one share at a time. ●



**Jessica Al Kadi, MSW '23**

Photos courtesy: Jessica Al Kadi

# From Lebanon to Buffalo, *with love*

BY JANA EISENBERG

With a seemingly endless well of empathy and an extraordinary understanding of the trauma- and solutions-informed viewpoint that the UB School of Social Work espouses, Jessica Al Kadi, MSW '23, seems to embody social work's future. This while being both grounded in the present and deeply informed by her past.

The 24-year-old grew up in Lebanon, experiencing the trauma and uncertainty that war can wreak. Now that she's a social worker, she has the language to name what she, her family and community went through.

"I didn't know about generational trauma, but I saw that my parents were in survivor mode," she says. "Their day-to-day lives were affected; our family was also affected by my grandparents' experience in earlier conflicts. When I was around 14, I started asking: 'Why do humans behave how they do?'"

That curiosity has only grown stronger. When the chance arose to come to Buffalo after high school, Al Kadi grabbed it. Landing here at 17, she enrolled in community college and found herself in culture shock. While her options were much greater than



they'd been at home, she was in a new position as an immigrant, coming to understand how it is to be perceived as "other."

"It was hard to find community," she says. "To fit in, I'd have to change — and if I didn't, the isolation and loneliness would increase."

She transferred to UB, declaring a double major in psychology and health and human services. But, she says, "Something still wasn't aligning; the courses didn't talk about things that are happening in the Middle East, things that affect behavior and mental health, like violence, war, colonization."

Post-undergrad, she was still searching. She consulted her then-advisor about her interest in systems and policies. "He recommended I look into social work; when I did, a lightbulb lit up," she says. Her childhood taught her not to have expectations for the future, but at that moment, she could picture herself as a social worker.

She entered the MSW program determined to be authentic and meet people as individuals, not, she says, "as their titles." She felt invited by the school to do that.

"An important part of my UBSSW experience was finding shared values, vision, purpose and community with students and faculty, staff, even the dean," she attests. "When you find that, you can be yourself."

Her UBSSW experience has driven home that advocacy is a big part of social work; she credits the school with fostering an environment where students can self-advocate.

"Learning how to advocate starts in the classroom," says Al Kadi. "Members of my class and I urgently pushed back, for example, if we felt something was not being taught through the trauma-informed lens." She notes that faculty, in particular Professor Emeritus Hilary Weaver, and her fieldwork liaison, Paige Iovine-Wong, MPH/MSW '20, both listened and thanked her for her advocacy.

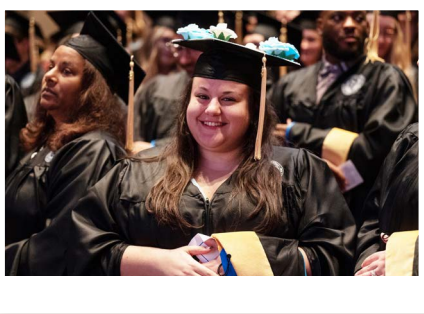
Al Kadi is a natural leader. Her grandfather, a community organizer, saw her potential and endowed her with some of his beliefs: "The higher up you go as a leader, the more you should give back — true leadership comes from the bottom up." As president of the school's Graduate Student Association, she put those ideas into action. "I was determined to

use this position of power to listen to and advocate for student needs," she says.

Among other honors, Al Kadi received a Behavioral Health Workforce and Education Training Fellowship and won the school's Outstanding Student Award. With her parents in attendance, she was a speaker at her 2023 graduation. She now is a counselor at BestSelf Behavioral Health, a position she earned after completing fieldwork there.

Her curiosity and passion grow stronger still. "I will never stop learning. Even now that I'm not in school, I'm looking for training and opportunities," Al Kadi says. "I want our society and world to be better, and I will keep fighting for that — with love, humility and compassion. Anger is crucial, but anger without love is destructive."

On a trip to Lebanon last year, she engaged with the community, offering psychoeducation meetings, asking what they needed. "Even when I'm in Buffalo, I'm thinking about my people. I want to continue to do things for them," she says. "Maybe not now. I'm not an expert; I still have a lot to learn." ●



## Congrats, grads!

This year, 240 students joined the ranks of UB School of Social Work alumni. We know each of you is poised to make a positive difference – and we can't wait to see how.

Download photos and relive the celebration at [tinyurl.com/ubssw-grad-2023](https://tinyurl.com/ubssw-grad-2023).

Hello!

## Class Notes are now online

Read about your fellow alumni and what they're up to now.

Visit [socialwork.buffalo.edu/classnotes-fall23](http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/classnotes-fall23).

CONNECT WITH US

