

# MOSAICS



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# News of the SCHOOL

## COMINGS & GOINGS

**Ashley Allen** joined UBSSW in the Fall 2017 as our academic processes coordinator. Allen was at SUNY Buffalo State College for 10 years, where her most recent title was coordinator for mandated programs.

After 17 years with UBSSW, **Zoe Koston** retired as senior field education coordinator. She'll generously continue to serve as a donor and volunteer, and for that we thank her.

**Barbara Rittner**, associate professor, who joined the faculty in 1993, has retired—her teaching duties will curtail after this summer. During her UBSSW career, she assumed many responsibilities, including PhD program director, associate dean for advancement, and generous donor.

**Laura Shrader**, student services advisor since 2013, has accepted a position as an instructional designer at SUNY Fredonia, in their expanding online programs.

Clinical Associate Professor **Charles Syms** retired after 22 years with the school; he will continue to teach here part-time. Syms has our eternal respect for his expert knowledge on addictions, and his leadership with interprofessional education, especially at the Lighthouse Medical Clinic.



## STUDENT NEWS

Congratulations to MSW/MPH student **Kailey Lopian**, who was selected to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's prestigious Minority Fellowship Program – Youth.

Students have founded a UBSSW chapter of the Macro Social Work Student Network, to advance education about and involvement in macro issues and/or macro social work practice, an important element regardless of one's current practice or focus. Students and faculty are welcome. For information on future events, contact **Temitope Oke (Temi)** at [toke@buffalo.edu](mailto:toke@buffalo.edu).



## EXPERT VISITOR

**Dr. Wynne Korr** (PhD '75 & BS '70) tackled some weighty topics when she visited her alma mater in November, 2017. At UB to accept a Distinguished Alumni award, she gave a talk to School of Social Work faculty on the future of social work education. Dean Nancy Smyth warmly welcomed Korr, former dean of the University of Illinois School of Social Work.

A nationally recognized voice regarding social innovation and entrepreneurship, Korr spoke to faculty for over an hour, taking questions and getting a few laughs.

Pointing out that social workers educated today will still be practicing in 2060, Korr said that social work educators must ask themselves what these students need to know to sustain them—such essentials as social work's goals and the nature of its services should continue to be considered, she posited.

Citing a missed opportunity, Korr lamented the fact that social welfare issues are not included in the general education curriculum.

In social work education, preparing students for the practice environment, considering shifts in service delivery models, and funding sources are all critical, she said. A social entrepreneurial mindset, the tension between micro and macro, ensuring that students feel that they've achieved competency—all were touched upon, and acknowledged to be part of the ongoing conversation.



## FACULTY ACHIEVEMENTS

**Hilary Weaver** is the recipient of the 2017 American Indian Elder Award from the Indigenous and Tribal Social Work Educators' Association. She is the youngest person to receive the award, and also one of the only recipients still actively teaching. The award recognizes her lifelong contributions to promoting American Indians in social work education.

**Melanie Sage**, who joined the faculty this year (see p. 10 for a brief profile), has received a \$2.4 million U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant, which she will use to continue research begun at the University of North Dakota, where she was first awarded the grant. She is the lead researcher on the five-year project; it's committed to gathering evidence and producing resources to improve the services that state agencies offer to Native American children and families involved in child welfare cases, in accordance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). She hopes an interdisciplinary approach, pulling together the many involved parties, will improve communication between systems in these proceedings.

## NEW PROGRAM

FROM THE OFFICE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

Social Work Practice Fellows, debuting this fall, is a premier 36-hour certificate program for social work supervisors featuring an advanced and sophisticated curriculum—the content focuses on the many complex issues that challenge MSW supervisors. The program, part of a multi-site initiative coordinated by two Adelphi University faculty, is supported by the Florence V. Burden Foundation and the Health Foundation for Western & Central New York. Visit [tinyurl.com/SWPFfall2018](http://tinyurl.com/SWPFfall2018) for details.

## GLOBAL & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

With strong hopes for more major funding, a project that could have long and wide ranging effects in Haiti is working towards creating a sustainable village and learning community in the Arcahaie region.

SUNY is a leader in the project, with participation from ten campuses and many disciplines. In addition, a group of nonprofits is participating. The project was inceptioned after Dr. Carmelle Bellefleur, a Nassau Community College professor emerita and Haitian native, donated land to create the village. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation is providing initial funding.

**Laura Lewis**, School of Social Work assistant dean for global partnerships and director of field education, along with Associate Professors **Filomena Critelli** and **Kelly Patterson**, is leading UB's participation. One of the project's goals is to avoid acknowledged challenges of successfully working in Haiti—an extremely impoverished society with systemic and rampant inequity.

The long-term goals for SUNY schools involved include connecting faculty with international projects, and fostering classroom collaborations. "Part of this project is bringing Haitian social work students and faculty together online with our faculty and students," said Lewis.

## FROM DEAN NANCY J. SMYTH

On many different fronts, these are more challenging times than I can recall. In the past, we've all had to respond to federal policy changes negatively affecting some vulnerable populations, but now we have an onslaught of policy changes affecting many, fueled by a divisive administration and people making all sorts of ill-informed, inflammatory comments. This nation is badly in need of a more civil discourse.

As a profession, we are very concerned about current and proposed policy changes, as well as the national dialogue around issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration, and sexual assault and harassment. Simply stated, this is a great opportunity to take social action in many concrete ways and to make our voices known.

In this context, the big challenge for us, as educators in a profession rooted in social justice, is to teach and champion our values while ensuring that we are supporting people's freedom of speech, acknowledging that there are different perspectives on solving a problem.

Last summer, a group of our faculty went to Michigan to learn more about facilitating successful intergroup dialogue across differences—that is, among individuals who have very different points of view, especially on "hot" issues. How does one encourage a conversation among people who fervently disagree, in a way that actually promotes meaningful dialogue? Our faculty work hard on this in the classroom every day.

Social work has a solution-focused perspective. We look for and work toward positive changes, rather than merely objecting to the negative. That's also part of the challenge for us at this time: because so much change is being proposed so quickly, it is easy to become overwhelmed. We need to ensure we target the right level of government, oppose the changes that would be hurtful, propose effective alternatives, and include everyone's voice. We can't do all of this for every problem—each of us needs to make decisions about where to put our focus. However, we can build coalitions, and support others' efforts, to ensure that many topics are being addressed.

There are stories in this issue about social action activities by students, faculty and alumni such as Kristen Weese's notable work helping homeless veterans find their way back. Hearing these stories, in the face of such challenging times, gives me hope for our future. I hope you feel the same way after reading them.



NANCY J. SMYTH, PHD, LCSW



Non-traditional  
social work careers  
are HOT!

Let us know how you're using your social work training and skills in surprising or unusual ways—what field are you in, and how does it apply?

Email us at [sw-mosaics@buffalo.edu](mailto:sw-mosaics@buffalo.edu)

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# MOSAICS

# A haven for the HOMELESS VETERAN

KRISTEN WEESE HAS BUILT A MODEL PROGRAM  
TO SHELTER THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED

| by Jim Bisco

Because her father, grandfather and father-in-law all served in the armed forces, Kristen Weese, BA/MSW '02, LCSW, knows what it means for them to have had welcoming homes with their families. And, when she had a chance to help veterans who did not have those basic comforts due to mental health, substance abuse or other issues, she embraced the opportunity.

"I can't think of any better cause than serving those who have served this great nation," she said. "My life and career experience has given me a very specific skill set to be able to assist this population."

Together with the support of her team of social workers, most of whom are SSW alumni, and multiple SSW interns, Weese helps homeless veterans and their families throughout Western New York find sustenance, homes, jobs, education, and their dignity. She accomplishes this through a program that has become a model for the VA network in eliminating bureaucratic barriers to provide immediate assistance.



*"I can't think of any better cause than serving those who have served this great nation."*

– Kristen Weese

## ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Weese's career in social work spans 15 years, encompassing mental health and substance abuse counseling, and medical social work. Since 2009, she has dedicated her career to Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) at the Veterans Affairs Western New York Healthcare System (VAWNYHS), first serving as a Department of Housing and Urban Development VA Supportive Housing (HUD VASH) case manager before becoming HCHV program manager in 2013.

"I directly oversee programs which offer emergency, transitional, and permanent housing to homeless veterans and their families," she said. "We also have an HPACT (Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team), a medical clinic for veterans in our program. In addition, we provide an outreach component; we go into local community shelters or to the street—we might get a phone call that someone appears to be a homeless veteran; maybe they're wearing a Vietnam War veteran hat, sleeping in the woods. We go out and find them."

The HCHV program helps about 1,600 veterans a year. The resources were slim when Weese began her VA career—she was one of only six staff members. In 2014, then-First Lady Michelle Obama challenged U.S. mayors to dedicate their communities to ending veteran homelessness. Programs were added as funding increased and the challenge benchmarks began to be met. Now Weese oversees a team of 20, including 14 social workers, 11 of whom are SSW alumni.

In October 2016, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, HUD, and the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that VAWNYHS effectively ended homelessness among veterans in their catchment area.

"We're very proud that we were among the first to do that," Weese stated. This catchment area covers seven Western New York counties. Weese said that the designation means VA, together with the community, has the infrastructure and the resources to effectively and quickly house a homeless veteran and his or her family.

"'Functional zero' does not mean that there aren't or won't be homeless veterans," she said. "It means that solid community relationships have been built and together we have the resources to assist any homeless veteran."

## CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Weese's VA awards, both national and local, recognize the creative solutions and the effective results that sustain the programs. She proudly points out that it is the work of a dedicated team. "We don't look at problems and say, 'we can't do that.' It's 'how'; how can we fix this, what can we do," she said.

In 2015 and 2017, Weese's program was recognized as a best practice. For example, it used to take weeks or even months to get through the Section 8 rental assistance process before a veteran could even begin looking for an apartment. "We completely streamlined the process, eliminating red tape and barriers," she said. "Now when a veteran comes in, if they don't already have their required documentation, we can get their birth certificates or discharge papers quickly from anywhere. We gather everything they need, and complete the public housing authority paperwork. We've become specialists in both filling it out and hand-delivering it, so that veterans can get their rental assistance voucher within about a week." Weese's team created a toolkit with the different tools that they've used to speed the process, and have shared those best practices with the VA nationally.

Another nationwide problem that Weese's team addressed was the ability to work with a veteran once he or she is no longer homeless—to look at the factors that may have contributed to their homelessness in the first place and avoid it happening again. "To address recidivism, we had another best practice in 2017, around our HUD and community partner relationships," she said. "We were recognized for regular conferences with our public housing authority to address any housing issues. We developed a template to teach other VAs how to work collaboratively with their public housing authority."

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CASE MANAGEMENT

Weese particularly values case management. "I've been a mental health and substance abuse social worker. I've done home care. All of that gave me the tools that I needed to be an effective case manager," she attested. "If you don't meet the veteran's basic needs of food and clothing, how are you going to work on what's making them depressed or anxious? You can't."



"It's practically immediate gratification—we're able to almost instantly change a challenging situation that a veteran may be in," she continued. "There's nothing more rewarding."

Weese credits her alma mater in part for the skill levels of her staff. "The UB School of Social Work trained us very well to be able to manage all of the needs of every person—not just the veterans. We 'case-manage' the whole family," she explained.

"We've become experts on knowing how to do things like get a homeless child enrolled in school," she continued. "I've gone to school boards with a veteran and their child, and said 'this child's homeless, we need to enroll them.' And they did. We can get that child to a doctor. We have resources to get children school supplies and Christmas presents."

## EMBEDDED INTERNS

Weese is particularly grateful for the work of SSW interns. In fact, five of the SSW alumni joined the staff after serving internships at the VA. Three MSW interns currently participate in street outreach and case management for the veterans.

"We give students a unique, hands-on perspective on social work," relates Weese. "If a veteran is being evicted from his apartment for hoarding, we figure out a way to assist that veteran in cleaning it up. If a veteran has lived in the woods for several years and doesn't know how to unclog a toilet, we teach him how to use a plunger. It's basic stuff that most of us take for granted. We really show the MSW students what case management is and what we can do as social workers."

"The interns are completely embedded in our program, participating in every aspect. They even helped plan our annual Thanksgiving dinner and holiday party for homeless veterans and their families," she said.



Weese and some of her staff and colleagues, many of whom started out as UBSSW interns and/or are alumni. (bottom, L to R) Stephanie Singer, MSW intern, Patrick Costello, Donna Leigh, MSW '02, David Silverheels, MSW intern, Thomas Szczygiel, Craig Voigt, MSW '03. (top, L to R) Allison O'Brien, MSW '06, Carolyn Vahoviak, Kristen Weese, BA/MSW '02, Christopher Ramnauth, Patrick Herbst, Stephanie Anzalone, MSW '10, Cole Johnson, Alicia Sholtz, MSW '10. Additional personnel (not pictured) include Karen Anderson, Christian Allport, Michael Balk, MSW '87, Edward Cooper, MSW '05, Michelle Duclos, MSW intern, Jeanne Heini, MSW '10, Sean Lindstrom, Sophia Miller, MSW '85, Kevin Quiambao, MSW '13, Daniel Stegeman, MSW '09 and Russell Stewart, MSW '10.

In keeping with the team's need to be flexible and uphold their "can do" attitude, the interns got an even more unique (and modern) hands-on experience recently. During a temporary relocation of the walk-in health clinic for homeless veterans, after their regular clinic flooded, they found themselves with no internet. Once armed with program-supplied iPads, the interns were able to continue to securely provide service for their clients, including accessing medical records, finding resources, and conducting virtual appointments.

"With the School of Social Work's emphasis on appropriate use of technology for social workers, I was so glad we could provide our

interns with the devices to be mobile and responsive, while not interrupting the flow of our work," Weese noted.

In addition to her own team, Weese praises the larger support from the administration. "The homeless program is a strong unit, and we have a committed VA Medical Center as well. They give us the resources that we need," she summed up. "We also have a committed and passionate community. We all work together to get the job done."

*"'Functional zero' does not mean that there aren't or won't be homeless veterans," Weese said. "It means that solid community relationships have been built and together we have the resources to assist any homeless veteran."*

Health Care for Homeless Veterans provides essentials to veterans moving out of homelessness (all of which are donated to the program), including personal care and household items, as well as new clothing and bedding.



Social workers and social work educators taking  
socially conscious actions  
— *in the* —  
**Trump era**





| by Jana Eisenberg

*It is in the social work code of ethics that social workers advocate for, defend, and work towards positive change on behalf of vulnerable, discriminated-against and disenfranchised people—namely, towards “social justice.”*

This means taking action—whether it’s professionally and on an individual level, personally, for example, going to demonstrations, or in daily practice, as a social work educator/researcher, student, or professional.

In these complex and divisive times—with this specific president and political climate—there are both challenges and opportunities for social workers and social work educators in taking such actions, especially considering the pervasive and seemingly deepening divides along racial, ethnic, sexual/gender identity, national, economic, party, personal and religious lines.

UBSSW faculty, staff and alumni are facing those challenges and taking those opportunities in various ways. In addressing issues through the lens of social work and social work education, Dean Nancy J. Smyth says that one challenge in all communication, and particularly in these times, is acknowledging others’ perspectives, and making sure to listen.

“We have to be careful when talking about social action; we don’t all think the same way about what constitutes social justice,” she said. “As educators, we must emphasize dialogue across differences—our faculty are getting training on how to do that in the classroom. We must continue to advocate for vulnerable people and for policy change, while educating about and understanding that we need to hear different voices.”

### **Facilitating dialogue**

Assistant Professor Annahita Ball did just that recently, when a consortium of Buffalo area high schools contacted UBSSW to request assistance working with their students on learning to become more aware of and speak with each other regarding issues around diversity.

With other UBSSW faculty members and a group of her MSW students, Ball organized a daylong workshop bringing together diverse students from several high schools. The MSW students gained confidence and experience moderating potentially sensitive topics, and the younger students were able to think, speak and learn in a supportive atmosphere.

Ball answered her own question, regarding why the high schools reached out to UBSSW now for help. “High schools have been working on these types of issues for decades,” she said. “But these unprecedented times feel like they’re pushing people to do something. I’ve heard our faculty members saying, ‘I haven’t done enough, I thought I was.’ It feels like a crisis; it’s more urgent to take these sorts of actions.”



*During a break-out session at the Challenge2Change Summit, MSW student Savannah Figueroa facilitated, reading scenarios where participating high school students might encounter diversity. In silence, the students reflected and walked to a space of their choice, representing zones of “comfort,” “danger,” or “learning edge.” They debriefed as a group after the exercise.*

*Photo: Candra Skrzypek, MSW '17*

Assistant Professor Mickey Sperlich at the 2018 Lansing, MI Women’s March. | Photo: Liz Brauer

## Facing discomfort and uncertainty

Teaching assistant and doctoral student Sarah Richards-Desai, MSW '17, agrees that, between policy changes and the tone and magnification of the national conversation in the past year, she's feeling and seeing more public discussion and more anxiety around various issues.

"I'm married to someone from another country, and I work with refugees. The week after the election, I was teaching in a class of diverse students about global social work and immigration," said Richards-Desai. "I shared with the class that at that moment I was concerned about the future of immigration policy, both personally and in my research. I wanted the class to be an open setting where people could say what they wanted; I'm there to help educate and professionalize new social workers."

"Because we are social workers, there are core principles that we must affirm, whether we personally agree with them. That can be uncomfortable for some; it's important to acknowledge dissent and division, which can impact us professionally," Richards-Desai continued. "As part of the higher education system, I acknowledge that uncertainty in the classroom."

The goal for students, said Richards-Desai and others, isn't to feel comfortable or safe in expressing potentially controversial or unpopular opinions, but to feel heard; the teacher's role is to direct the discussion so that everyone can learn from it.

(See sidebar for some of the social actions in which Richards-Desai and other UBSSW individuals participate.)

"When a student says something [that might echo some of the more hateful rhetoric] during a class, it can be difficult to make sense of it," agreed Nadine Shaanta Murshid, assistant professor. "The students all look to me, and I have to encourage conversation; I try to switch from challenging the person's ideas or belief system, to an inclusive, critical, logical and structural exploration of the sources of inequality or the social norms that are creating the issue."

"It's so easy to dehumanize and stereotype people who don't agree with us. And neither a debate or facts alone works; stories can help," said Smyth. "I start with the assumption that everyone is human; that they want some of the same things that I do. Then you can ask, what is important to you? How have you come to that belief system or opinion?"



Many UBSSW faculty, staff, students, alumni, family and friends attended Buffalo's second Women's March, on Jan. 21. While they didn't go as a group, they gathered for this photo; their signs, mostly homemade, show some of their interests and passions. (From L to R): Brandy Loveland, MSW '16, with sons Trevor and Jackson; Jodi Kwart, MSW '08; Evangeline Kudela, daughter of Jessica Kudela, MSW '05; MSW student Wayne Brown with daughter Julia; Jocelyn Bos-Fisher, MSW '15; Jesse Orrange; Angel Minuto-Regling, BA/MSW '15; Jennifer Cristina, MSW '15; MSW student Nicole Jones; Assistant Professor Shaanta Murshid; Associate Professor Filomena Critelli; Christopher Orrange; Assistant Professor Elizabeth Bowen; Bob Orrange; Julia Szprygada, MSW '13; Maureen Hammett, vice dean and chief of staff; Dina Thompson, instructor; Sarah Watson, communications officer; Associate Professor Diane Elze. | Photo: Alexis Olmer

# Some examples of how we TAKE ACTION:



## STUDENT TAKES SOCIAL ACTION ON HER OWN

PhD student/activist **Josie Diebold** is deeply involved in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), a grassroots organization committed to dismantling white supremacy. As part of a campaign to oust the Erie County sheriff, she had letters published in local newspapers and was a media spokesperson at a rally. She was also arrested during a direct action to protest the sheriff and his policies.



## TAKING ON ISSUES VIA SOCIAL MEDIA AND TWITTER

**Pat Shelly**, MSW '95, SSW director of community engagement and expansion, hosted a live Twitter chat as a member of #MacroSW, a collaboration of social workers, organizations, social work schools, and individuals that promotes macro social work practice. The discussion, on innovating gang violence prevention through social media, featured Desmond Patton talking about his research project, @SAFELab.



## REGIONAL COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE DELIVERY OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

**Samantha Koury**, LMSW, MSW '15, project manager at UBSSW's Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care (ITTIC) reports that ITTIC facilitated a seven-month learning collaborative, training almost 40 trauma-informed care "champions" across Western New York's eight counties. Through a contract with the Trauma Informed Community Initiative of Western New York and the Health

Foundation's Health Leadership Fellows Program Cohort V, The WNY Champion Team learned how to create and advocate for trauma-informed organizations.



## FACILITATING IN HIGH SCHOOLS TO ADDRESS BIAS, PRIVILEGE, AND OPPRESSION

Challenge2Change (#c2cwny) has grown from a partnership between one high school and the SSW into a wider and ongoing program, offering opportunities for MSW students to gain real-life facilitating experience while working with high school administrations and students to develop anti-racism programs and dialogue. (See main story for comments from one of the organizers, Assistant Professor Annahita Ball.)



## MULTIPLE ISSUES AND ACTIONS

**Diane Elze** PhD, associate professor and director of the MSW program, is involved in many local groups, including Showing Up for Racial Justice, the Fire Howard campaign, and the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition.



## EXPRESSING HERSELF IN PRINT

Assistant Professor **Nadine Shaanta Murshid** writes opinion articles for the Daily Star, an English-language print and online newspaper in Bangladesh. A sampling of her 2017 headlines: "Spot the Patriarchy," "The Case for Angry Women," and "Minority Lives Matter."

## Global problems, personal decisions

By their code, social workers are called to help bridge societal divides, for example, between immigrants and refugees and their advocates, and those who may profess anti-immigrant sentiment.

“These divides are global, they are not new, and this didn’t happen overnight,” said Murshid. “I will ask my students, when something happens, who benefits? What is the purpose of creating this kind of division? We can laugh about what’s happening on Twitter, but the truth is [these policies and actions] all have a purpose—they are all to divide. This old tool, dividing to control, seems truer today than last month in some way.”

It can be challenging for social workers to maintain momentum and commitment to action, with near-daily policy changes and threats to vulnerable populations.

“If and how to get involved is a personal decision each social worker makes depending on skills, interests, and comfort level,” said Ball. “I do some in my personal work, but maybe not as much as I think I should. There was a point in life where all of my volunteer and community participation was around social action and social work; you can burn out. Now I do things that are more ‘here and there,’ like Girls on the Run, which is about opportunities for girls, as well as going to protests.”

## Media-driven divisions?

“With the popularity and rise of cable TV news, we became able to choose sources that support what we’re interested in,” said Smyth. “I love social media, but it’s not always good....now, with the ‘filter bubbles,’ it’s easier to live in different cultural realities; we lack a shared understanding of what we think is happening. Our entire society—including academics—doesn’t do a good job of evaluating content.”

Murshid agrees, and in the classroom or in conversation, urges people to question: where did we hear a particular opinion? Are we parroting someone else? What are the sources of barriers to critical thinking?



Ali Kadhum MSW '14, one of the founders of World Refugee Day in Western New York, at the event in 2017.

“We need to believe in fact-based ideas, in research and science—and need others to as well,” she said. “As social workers and social work researchers, we need more evidence about policies and their implications. We must push against the anti-intellectualism wave that we are in the middle of; we must promote evidence-based practice. The need for it is that much more.”

All agree that social workers and educators can help each other remain resilient in tough times—both by reminding themselves of their initial passion and commitment for the profession, as well as engaging in self-care. “People are feeling like they’re under siege,” said Smyth. “Every day, multiple things happen, and you ask yourself, how can I possibly address all of these? To avoid getting overwhelmed and paralyzed, I encourage people to limit exposure, to get headlines from trusted sources, and dive in to get details.”

“While we have to do more in terms of work on the ground, self-care is something that we often forget, and it is so important,” said Murshid. “In these times, self-care can be an act of revolution.”



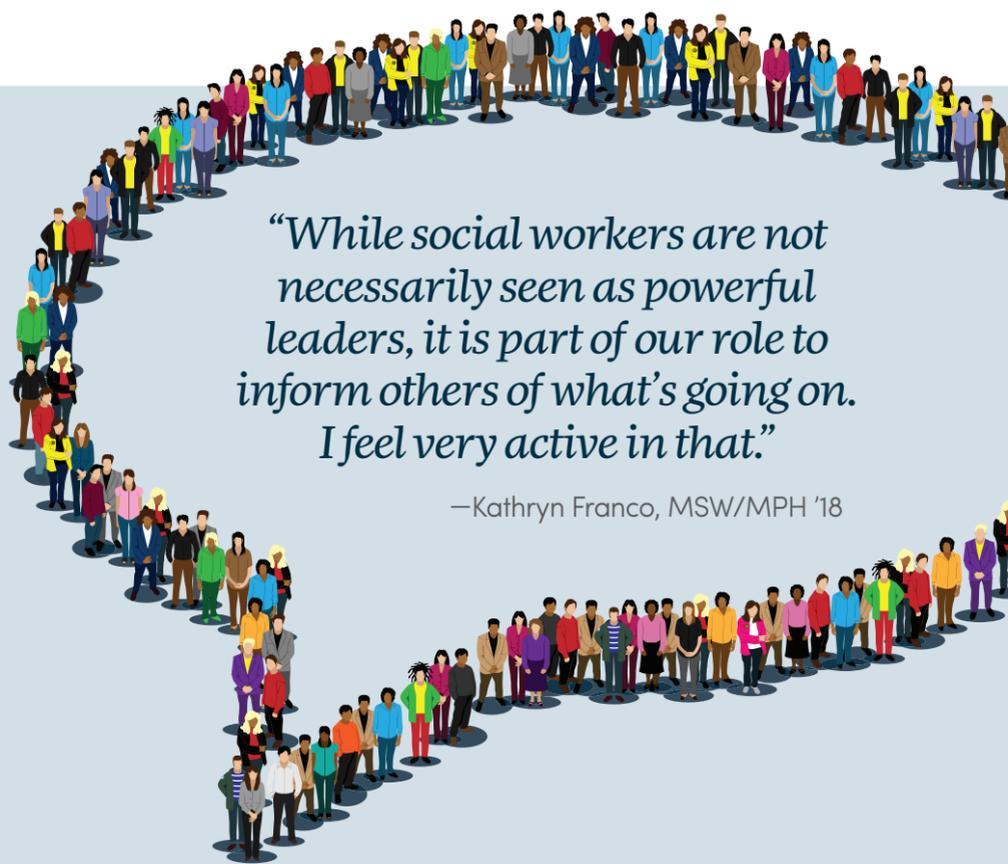
## EXTREMELY ACTIVE ACTIVIST

PhD student **Sarah Richards-Desai**, MSW '16 founded “Checking in: Potluck and Postcards,” a political letter writing and Facebook group—friends and colleagues get together, share a meal and information, and write to lawmakers on social justice issues, as well as staying in touch between meetings via their Facebook group. She blogs and gives presentations (a recent example: Erie Niagara Area Health Education Center on the value of cultural humility and expanding access to healthcare for marginalized communities). Richards-Desai’s also joins in marches/protests (bringing her young child to many), attends hearing and sessions on issue of concern, and volunteers at events. One such event is World Refugee Day in WNY (an international annual event founded in 2000 by the United Nations; locally, **Ali Kadhum**, MSW '14, was one of the people who began organizing the regional event around 2009.) Many SSW faculty, students and alums participate in the annual refugee-led event, celebrating refugees and newcomers. “This year more than ever, we gathered to support our communities, expanding to emphasize refugee women and girls,” said Richards-Desai. “I coordinated family, youth, and women’s events, fundraised, donated, and ran events all day.”



## A FOCUS ON THE FUTURE FOR HIS KIDS

Raising their three young children to be “gender-equality focused” is a commitment that MSW student **Wayne Brown** and his wife have made. “The government today genuinely makes me sad,” said Brown. “I feel that it’s my duty to put forth gender-equality motivated young people—to let them try and make a better place than what we’ve given them.” That’s why Brown, who says he’s been a “social activist” most of his life, took his oldest, a four-and-a-half year-old girl, to the Women’s March in Buffalo earlier this year. “My wife wasn’t sure about me taking her,” continued Brown. “But you can’t teach kids to be advocates and activists simply with words. It was a fantastic experience—of course she’s only 4½, but she asked what it was about, and I said that these people are working to make sure that as she gets older, she has the same rights as everyone else.”



*“While social workers are not necessarily seen as powerful leaders, it is part of our role to inform others of what’s going on. I feel very active in that.”*

—Kathryn Franco, MSW/MPH '18



## BECOMING A LEADER, MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Because of the “trying time” we’re living in, and the division she’s felt even with some family members, **Kathryn Franco**, MSW/MPH '18, knew that, during her internship, she wanted to reengage somewhere that she could make an impact. Franco, who identifies as a woman of color and queer, selected Partnership for Public Good, a community think-tank action group in Buffalo, where she is conducting “macro policy research work,” and reaching directly out to policymakers to seek support for the group’s positions. “This feels so utterly important,” said Franco. “While social workers are not necessarily seen as powerful leaders, it is part of our role to inform others of what’s going on. I feel very active in that.”

# Hello

## Gokul Mandayam

CLINICAL ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR



From undergraduate work in business administration in India, Gokul Mandayam has come a long way. He knew he was a “people person”; early training taught him skills and an understanding of the corporate mindset. “I wanted to straddle both my interest in the business world and my passion for working with people,” he said.

His decades of experience include working with the World Bank, as an Arizona state senate intern, and in corporate roles (where, through research, he helped put a face on human behavior). Eventually finding his way to social work education, Mandayam has come to focus his practice on macro, systems, and also diverse societies and individuals—acceptance and inclusion.

He’s taught in California (USC) and in the Middle East (United Arab Emirates University). “I’ve learned to throw away stereotypes, and go into every culture with a clean slate. That helps you absorb the nuances—you might not like everything, but you are in someone else’s land,” he said. “Even though people may grow up differently, with different value systems, we’re the same—we have hearts, brains, physical selves.”

Mandayam’s upcoming book, on social entrepreneurship and social innovation for social work practice, is, he said, “the fruits of my labor around this interdisciplinary thinking.” With that he adds, he’s grateful to the school for this new position.

## Melanie Sage

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR



Driving Melanie Sage’s passion for social work are a focus on family welfare, an interest in technology and social media, and deep commitment to professional service and education.

Growing up, Sage knew she wanted to be a child welfare social worker—

like her mom. After acquiring her bachelors and masters, Sage interned in child welfare. She thought that a supervisory role in the field would help her positively affect the workforce.

A decade (and a PhD) later, Sage is a researcher and educator; active in social work’s professional side. “I want to see social work education and my professional activities have an impact on real-life practice and on people,” said Sage.

Her interest in technology makes her outspoken. “Technology is here; many are embracing it—and those who are resistant need to know how it might be useful,” she said.

She and her husband, Todd Sage (who also joined UBSSW faculty—see the panel to the right), were excited to move to Buffalo. Sage also appreciates the atmosphere at UB. “Because there’s good support here, I have more time to do my work,” she said. “It’s been nice to have a settling-in period. The combination of quality of life alongside research and great resources seems to create a really good culture.”

## Todd Sage

CLINICAL ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

His wife’s passion for social work began his journey as a social work educator, said Todd Sage. (She’s also his colleague, Melanie Sage. See profile to the left.)

Before serving in the military, he’d worked as an EMT, so Sage considered the medical field for undergraduate studies. After some exploration in majors (history, nursing) he ended up in social work.

“Like many people, I didn’t understand social work,” he said. “I thought it was ‘touchy-feely’ or you’re a baby snatcher. When I saw what they actually did, I thought I could get behind it.”

His field work, at San Bernardino County Social Services, cinched it. “I fell in love; I loved the clients, the role of protecting children,” he said.

Sage worked in child protective services in Portland, Oregon, while pursuing his MSW. He then became the liaison between child services and the local police department.

His wife’s academic career took the Sages east. “Rural North Dakota has a lot of one-person child welfare offices, without resources,” he said. “As the statewide child welfare specialist, I traveled to investigate high-risk, high-conflict cases.”

The focus of his current doctoral studies is quality higher education: emphasizing how to teach and teach well. “Educators are the frontline people, ensuring that graduates are prepared to go do their jobs. I like to think I can have a role in that,” he said.



# → GETTING TO KNOW THE NEW FACULTY

## Michael Lynch (MSW '10)

→ CLINICAL ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, FIELD EDUCATION



After undergraduate studies at SUNY Geneseo in sociology, Michael Lynch was drawn to social work—in his definition, “fighting against oppression and injustices.”

The Rochester native applied to UB’s MSW program; even though he wasn’t even sure what social work was, he figured that it could help him put some of the sociology theory he’d learned into practice.

Multiple motivations included personal—“seeing friends and family experiencing structural poverty and racism”—and experiential: “As I became more informed and aware [about oppression and how many people need help], I felt more motivated to effect change,” said Lynch.

Drawn to UBSSW—both the professors’ passion, and its overall vision—as a faculty member himself now, Lynch is committed to helping students gain the enlightening experience he did through his own fieldwork.

“Fieldwork is the link between the university and what’s happening on the ground, in the community. It has a strong impact on your education as you are preparing for your career,” he said.

Lynch’s goals here include deeper integration of data and technology, as well as creating more meaningful collaborations between faculty and students participating in fieldwork.

“Why can’t we match our faculty’s areas of specialized practice or research to help the students at a higher level?” he said. “There’s a lot of energy at the school.”

## Kathryn McClain-Meeder (MSW '12) ←

CLINICAL ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, FIELD EDUCATION



Social work was always Katie McClain-Meeder’s path—“to work towards the common good, walk with people and help improve lives.” After some varied experience and growth, she’s found her way here.

Post-undergraduate studies near Boston, she worked with refugee youth, aiming for international social work. Returning to Buffalo around 2007 (she’s from the area), she founded a similar program called Hope, still operating at Jericho Road Community Health Center.

Seeking a broader practice experience, McClain-Meeder worked with teenage moms in foster care, ending up at Gateway. She returned to UB to get her MSW, and found her true road.

“Trauma is the common thread that runs through social work,” she said recently. “The realization that each population—whether refugees or teenage moms in foster care—has different yet similar needs is influential. In all cases, we try to

understand some of what they’ve been through, respond in affirming ways, and offer some hope.”

She takes a special pleasure in her current role. “It’s exciting to provide connections and meaningful field experience for students,” she said. “I also enjoy bridging what can be a divide between community practice students and faculty.”

McClain-Meeder also walks the walk at home; she and her husband own and operate Little Bear Farm, where they grow and market ecologically responsible food (eggs, vegetables).

# SocialFuse ignites innovative ideas to solve societal problems

| by Jim Bisco

**T**rying to solve the world's problems can feel overwhelming. Trying to solve problems in one's own little corner of the world can be easier to grasp — although it requires creative thinking and realistic execution to impact and sustain any possible solutions.

SocialFuse is a conversational gathering on the UB campus of students, faculty, staff and community members from a variety of interests, majors and backgrounds. It aims to fuse them through skills, ideas and social entrepreneurial ambition into well-rounded, multi-disciplinary teams, which will move ideas forward and create successful social ventures.

The first in a planned series of Fuses occurred last fall in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences' Davis Hall. A small but committed number of attendees responded positively to a panel presentation in the first part of the afternoon.

"The panel presentation was to inspire students with engaged individuals from the community who are doing this work— to give students some examples of different models of not-for-profits and for-profit organizations and how they work in this space," said Hadar Borden, program director of Blackstone LaunchPad, a campus hub dedicated to nurturing innovation and entrepreneurship.

*"People who are engaged in the community and know the resources can help ignite something for a student team. Oftentimes students are in this university bubble. This is a way to connect them with the community which has so many resources to support them."*

— Hadar Borden,  
Blackstone LaunchPad program director

lending library; and UB Honors College student Alex Dombrowski, who wants to develop a venture that supports informed charity donation and global awareness.

A Fusion idea and brainstorming session occurred after the panel discussion. Two UB students and two alumni presented kernels of ideas for consideration. These included homeless outreach, a computer application to unite neighborhoods, and a matchmaking service for single parents from foreign backgrounds. The idea was to fuse both ideas and people, while providing participants with positive feedback to and extensions of their ideas.

A contingent of what Borden calls "reactors" to the ideas included SSW Dean Nancy J. Smyth, attorney Joseph Trapp, founder and CEO of Third Estate Ventures, Ezra Staley, executive director of social innovation at UB, and Wynne Korr, professor and former dean, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who brought the SocialFuse concept to UB.

"People who are engaged in the community and know the resources can help ignite something for a student team," noted Borden. "Oftentimes students are in this university bubble. This is a way to connect them with the community which has so many resources to support them."

Borden sees this event launch as a harbinger of greater things to come. "I hope to create a space where students with similar interests and passions can come together," she said. "You can't start a for-profit or not-for-profit alone. You need a team. We want to make sure that our students feel that support, so the best way to do that is to bring people together to exchange ideas and find partners."

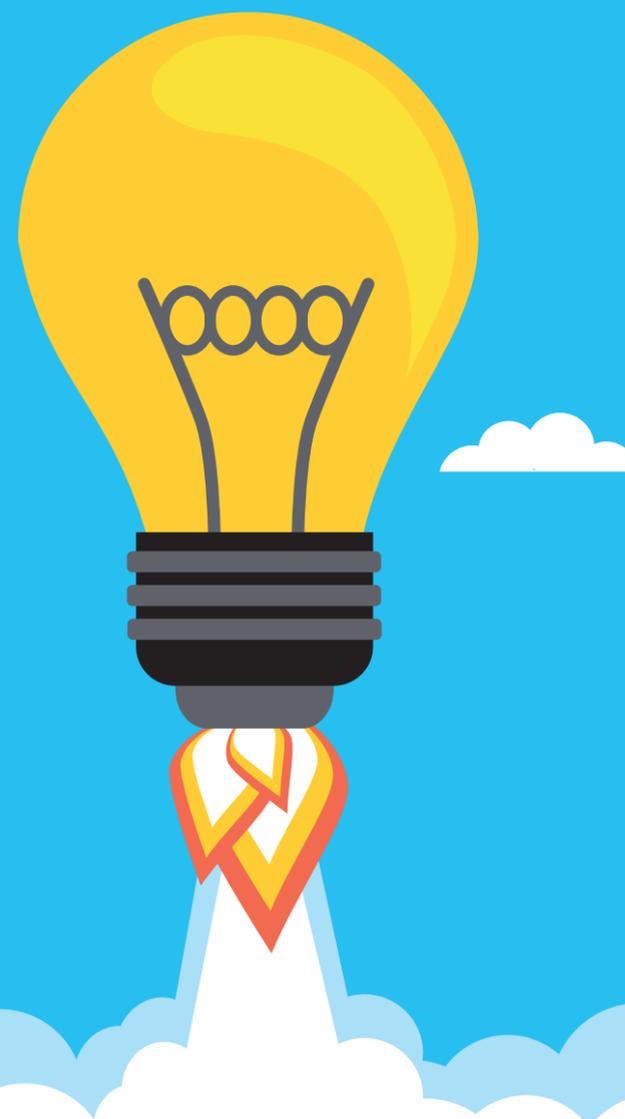
Borden said that the LaunchPad could build on some of the ideas that were presented at the initial Fuse; this initial event helped to identify different workshops which LaunchPad may offer, including ones that focus on the legal how-tos of starting a not-for-profit. "There is always something that comes out of a conversation that we can build on," summed up Borden. "That's what keeps me motivated and excited. There are an infinite number of possibilities."

As campus-wide interest in social innovation and entrepreneurship continues to evolve and expand, additional iterations of the SocialFuse idea appear to be a logical next step.



After the panel presentation and an idea session, SocialFuse attendees and panelists networked and brainstormed with "reactors," including Wynne Korr, former dean of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign School of Social Work (right). Future events and actions are planned.

The panel included Ahmad Nieves, relationship manager with The Foundry (a non-profit working to increase neighborhood prosperity by empowering individuals through education and entrepreneurship); Bob Confer, of Confer Plastics, a for-profit organization supporting employment for new Americans; Daniel Auflick of the Matt Urban Hope Center, which finds jobs and housing for homeless people; Darren Cotton, promoting community empowerment with his tool



# UB Social Work alum's charitable campaigns serve those in need, with a focus on homeless veterans

| by Jana Eisenberg

For the past 30 years, Bob James, MSW '77 has been combining his passions into an effective and fulfilling mission—pulling together his love of music, and making a positive difference through social causes, all while referencing his graduate training as a social worker.

Through his current nonprofit, Buffalo Blues Benefit for Veterans, James, now 65, organizes live music events, and records and sells CDs. Any and all profits go to the cause. That cause is veterans' homelessness, and it's striking a chord both with him and supporters. Since mid-2016, they've donated over \$21,000 to the Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition ([wnyvhc.org](http://wnyvhc.org)).

James emphasizes that Buffalo Blues has a universal and non-political appeal. Using social media early on, he quickly gained a Facebook community several thousand strong.

With a wide range of attendees at the live music fundraisers, which are hosted at bars and other venues, James said that the events are inclusive. "The power of the music, and the personal connections brought out dissolve any partisan differences," said James. "There's a great vibe at our events; when they are over, people don't want to leave."

"Buffalo Blues resonates with musicians wanting their talents to serve a 'higher cause,'" said James. The musicians who participate also benefit—while using their art to inspire others, they may also gain exposure to new audiences. "Raising money this way, for proven programs is more tangible than raising awareness; I like to ground things in measurable outcomes. After our sponsors donate, we thank them—and give them data about where and how their donations were used."

The Buffalo Sabres have thrown their weight behind Buffalo Blues, donating game tickets, merchandise and funds. That connection and others, said Gigi Grizanti, president and CEO of the WNY Veterans Housing Coalition, have elevated the organization and its cause.

"In addition to a place to live, we provide services," she said. "With the money that Buffalo Blues has donated, we bought a van, so it's easier to take clients on fishing trips and picnics. We also purchased beds, and can provide them with a more robust 'starter package,' including household items. Homeless veterans support and understand each other. Once they come here and get on their feet, many of them don't want to go anywhere else."

James own life path wasn't always so clear. After a rocky start in college, he earned his social work graduate degree (a Buffalo

State psychology professor suggested it). He then took a job at the VA Hospital, moving on to Crisis Services in 1982. He started as an emergency outreach worker, and soon became its director of professional services.

"Through my Crisis Services experience, I developed a new world view," he said. "Most people have no idea of what kind of 'insanity' could be going on in any house, on any street. I learned that I can handle anything, and that nothing can shock me."

Over the years, other causes for which James has used this music model include a campaign against violence in schools, and a three-CD effort to benefit the Food Bank of WNY—it ultimately raised 100,000 meals.

In all of the projects, musicians donate their time to both perform live and record CDs for sales to raise money. As awareness of each project's success grew, a wider range of artists wanted to participate—that list now includes Jackson Browne, Ani DiFranco, Melissa Etheridge, the Goo Goo Dolls, Heart, the Indigo Girls, Yoko Ono, and Patti Smith.

The current project's focus on the blues came about as James suspected that the genre's emotional tone could resonate with the notion of support for organizations helping homeless people.

"As Buffalo Blues took shape, we decided to focus more on homeless veterans," said James. "Homelessness is complex for anyone—issues with family, possibly addiction, or mental health issues. It's even more complex if someone is a veteran with military or even pre-military challenges also factoring in."

Through this effort, James has come to appreciate even more the sacrifices that men and women who serve in the military make. "I'm convinced that this is the right thing at the right time," he summed up. "If we can give back to veterans, while using this cool music and having a little fun at the same time...it's silly to even compare the investment we make, versus what vets do for us. They write a blank check and give their lives to the military."



Photo: Michael Mietlick



In June of 2016, James (back row, second from left) along with a group of participating musicians presented then-Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition CEO Celia O'Brien (pink jacket) and staff with a check representing a portion of the proceeds to date. Also in the photo: Mary Collins and Rick Suto (Buffalo Blues); musicians Josh English, Greg Leech, Grace Lougen, David Miller, and Chelsea O'Donnell, plus Daniel Ratka (Erie County Veterans Services), Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz, and Gigi Grizanti of the WNYVHC.

## To learn more about Buffalo Blues, visit:

- [buffaloblues.org](http://buffaloblues.org)
- [twitter.com/Blues4vets](https://twitter.com/Blues4vets)
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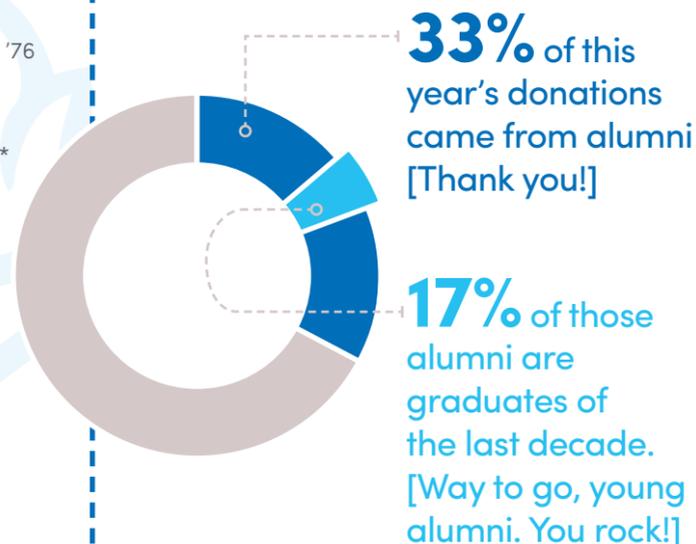
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Casey Springer likes to say that he didn't choose social work, it chose him. After going through multiple traumas in the military, Springer said "No medical doctor, no clinical psychologist, not even the criminal justice system could change my life. The only person who did was a Buffalo social worker; this inspired me to give back." Springer became a student in the JD/MSW program, and found support for his interest in politics from the UB Fund, which helped him attend Lobby Day in Albany and a social work advocacy meeting in Washington DC. Saying he may enter politics post-graduation to lead state and federal change, Springer thanked UB Fund donors for giving him experiences he "never dreamed possible."

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