

# MOSAICS

Fall 2022

## Restorative Practices:

### Building connections and community with intention

*A practice to proactively prevent conflict and repair harms in a wide variety of settings*

By Jana Eisenberg

**T**he use of restorative practices helps to:

- reduce crime, violence and bullying
- improve human behavior
- strengthen civil society
- provide effective leadership
- restore relationships
- repair harm

— From the International Institute for Restorative Practices

In the context of the growing awareness of the deep inequities within our culture, institutions and society, the idea of promoting proactive restorative practices is becoming increasingly popular. The fact that restorative practices (RP) can be used in a wide variety of settings, not just as an alternative to a reactive, punitive justice system, is very appealing to its advocates.

Assoc. Prof. Diane Elze is one of those advocates. “The punitive systems in this country disproportionately target people of color,” she said. “RP is a different way of thinking about how to intervene when conflict or wrongdoing occurs. RP doesn’t just respond to and repair harm; it’s also aimed at building community and strengthening relationships. Wherever people are together, RP can be used.”

Rather than taking a traditional approach to conflict resolution, i.e., *you broke the rules/law, you must be punished*, RP brings the stakeholders in a conflict together to communicate; to work through the issues and consider alternative solutions.

Elze and Dina Thompson, the executive director of the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition (ECRJ), agree that



Dina Thompson (left), executive director of the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition and adjunct UBSSW instructor, and Diane Elze (right), associate professor and associate dean of academic affairs, are working together to increase the use of restorative practices for multiple positive results, which include conflict resolution and more equitable and non-punitive solutions to a variety of issues in a range of settings.

when more widely integrated, the proactive RP process has the potential to prevent conflict and heal individuals, communities and culture.

Thompson is also an adjunct instructor at the school and has been teaching a course in the use of RP since 2015. “RP is an important skill and philosophy for social work students to have,” iterated Elze. “It can be utilized in many different settings, like child welfare, criminal and juvenile justice systems, and other service delivery systems.”

“RP could be used to reduce the ‘school to prison pipeline’ cycle that we know exists. Instead of suspending kids, sometimes the same kids, multiple times, RP establishes a process for looking at what caused the challenging behavior,” Thompson said. “When harm or wrongdoing has occurred, it brings those who have been affected together to find solutions, hold people accountable and change behavior. We know that the current system is not working; repeated suspensions often

Q & A:

## Hilary N. Weaver

Hilary N. Weaver, DSW, has been on the faculty at our school since 1993. As she looks toward the next phase of her professional life (hint: she's retiring from UB, and will no longer be in the classroom, but she'll be plenty active), she spoke with *Mosaics* about her legacy at UB and her goals to help shape the future of social work education.

**MOSAICS:** *What are some highlights from your time at the UBSSW?*

**Hilary Weaver:** I'm particularly proud of building our global initiatives. Around 2012, I took on the administrative role of associate dean for academic affairs, and thought about ways to make my mark. I realized that I wanted to build on diversity initiatives—and for those initiatives, like addressing social issues, to become normal and regular things that the school does; part of our implicit curriculum. Working with others, we established a Global to Local monthly luncheon series. We also created an annual daylong symposium; issues we've highlighted include Syrian refugees, missing and murdered Indigenous women, and environmental justice. In our Community Conversations series we've focused on issues like racial justice and economic inequality. Rather than just attending and listening, we hoped that people would be moved to take action. We also have posted statements about important topics in the news. These initiatives show everyone—others within the university, community, staff, faculty and current and potential students—that social workers see these areas as important, in fact, central to our work.

**MOSAICS:** *Why retire now?*

**HW:** I'm part of the pandemic-related trend of people reevaluating their lives, thinking about what they want to do and what's important. I am proud to have built my career here. And this is not a standard retirement—yes, I'm stepping away from the day-to-day of social work education and academia, but now I have opportunities to “make my mark” at a different level. To take my skills and vision, and help shape the social work profession.

**MOSAICS:** *Exciting. What will you be doing?*

**HW:** I was recently elected chair of the board of directors of the Council on Social Work Education. This national body oversees every accredited social work program in the country; I am the first Indigenous woman in the position, and also have an Indigenous vice chair/secretary. This is an opportunity to re-envision social work education at a different scale, looking at and helping shape where it should go.



I also have been named the inaugural global Indigenous commissioner for the International Federation of Social Workers. This worldwide body has a history of membership by country; it's never had a structure that allowed for Indigenous voices and input. It took years of advocacy; now, for the first time ever, the organization has established

an Indigenous commission that I now convene. I feel privileged that I have these opportunities, and I believe they are “the right thing at the right time.” It is meaningful that I'm going to finish out my career making a difference on a large scale, which in no way takes away from what I've done at UB.

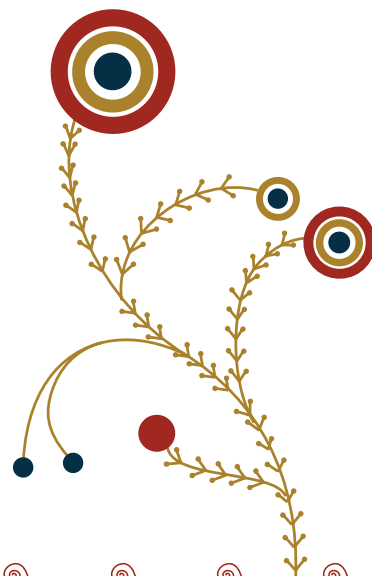
**MOSAICS:** *Your work has been inseparable from your identity as a Lakota woman and someone who is passionate about helping displaced people, like Indigenous populations and refugees, who have experienced trauma and who are enveloped in foreign cultural contexts. Can you share any plans or desires related to that?*

**HW:** I will also remain involved in building and strengthening the Indigenous and Tribal Social Work Educators' Association, so that when the time really does come for me to step away, there will be a formalized infrastructure for Indigenous people in social work education. This goes hand-in-hand with infiltrating traditional organizations with Indigenous ideas.

**MOSAICS:** *Any last thoughts?*

**HW:** All of this work is in parallel: strengthening both organizations and my colleagues, helping open doors for people who are coming behind me, like those ahead of me did for me. I could only build my career because of those who came before and did the work that they did.

Interview has been condensed for space and clarity.





## DEAN'S COLUMN

As a social worker, social work educator, and citizen of the planet, human rights are never far from my mind. This issue of Mosaics—and the stories within—gives me the opportunity to share with all of you, our alums, friends and community, some reflections on recent events, and how social workers, and social work education, remain a critical component of being part of positive change; of holding up human rights for all.

Our lead story is about using restorative practices as a method for addressing harms done; how those practices, mindfully and consistently incorporated, could begin to reduce societal ills like trauma, violence, crime, prejudice and hatred. Restorative practices are intended to foster listening and deeper understanding of each other. You will read about how Assoc. Prof. Diane Elze and Adjunct Instructor Dina Thompson, executive director of the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition, are teaching our students these mindful skills, and working to incorporate them in our own school's toolbox as well as into the broader community.

After the May 14 targeted mass shooting of innocent Black people by a white supremacist gunman here in Buffalo, where those 10 Black victims' human rights were suddenly and violently removed, our university community saw the need to take action. The effects of grief and trauma from that horrific event are enduring. To begin and facilitate the healing process, the UB School of Social Work collaborated with the Center for Mind-Body Medicine, the Heart Nest, and the WNY Peace Center for a series of gatherings and workshops titled Embracing Buffalo. Nationally renowned speakers Dr. Sabrina N'Diaye, Dr. Carol Penn and Dena Adler, with the assistance of Kenya Pope, facilitated four days of events offering hope, healing, and renewal for community healers and survivors. The final two days were held at the UB Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences, and served as a retreat for Black healers and leaders. We know that healing is not prescriptive; it is a personal journey that's different for everyone. We feel fortunate to have been able to help community participants start on the long road toward healing from the racial trauma.

In a brief Q&A, we only scratch the surface of the impact that Prof. Hilary Weaver has had during her time here; she is leaving our faculty after almost 30 years. She will

go on to roles in national and international organizations, continuing her deep commitment to shaping social work education, and to lifting up Indigenous and refugee voices; we will miss her presence here, but know with pride that she is doing important work.

Race and equity also play a part in another story in this issue, a profile of our PhD student Jessica Mencia. She speaks about the importance of abortion access, especially for people who have been traditionally marginalized; you will learn about her focus on including a broader range of voices in the policymaking that affects underprivileged populations. This of course leads me to the decision by the Supreme Court on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, overturning *Roe v. Wade*. These decisions effectively erased a half century of the right to choose to have an abortion, and are already having a devastating impact on the lives of many, who are unable to access necessary health care where they live.

With these and other ongoing challenges to human rights, whether by the courts, gun violence, racism, and economic disparities, we must maintain our belief in our profession, our practice of advocating for ourselves and each other; for and with those who need it most. Thank you as always for joining me in our commitment to social work practice, education, and awareness.

In camaraderie and solidarity,



Keith A. Alford, PhD, ACSW  
Dean and Professor



# MOSAICS

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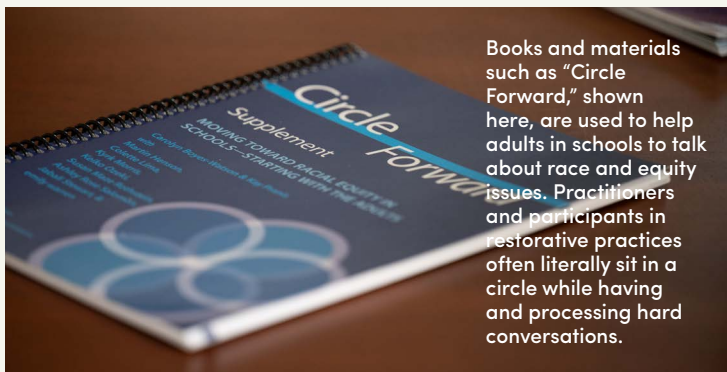
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lead to a failure to graduate. And 68% of incarcerated people don't have a high school diploma."

"The Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition was created in 2013 to look at alternative solutions, especially for communities and people of color who are negatively impacted by systems, including schools, criminal justice, and society in general," added Thompson. "We received training from the International Institute for Restorative Practices, and learned how to train others in the necessary skill set. We would like to see RP used in places like schools, policing and in the courts, to offer alternatives to punitive practices."

Without other major cultural and structural changes, there are challenges to the practice. "I'm thrilled to be part of the adjunct staff at UB; it gives me opportunities to have conversations about racial impact and potential healing," she said. "But the bigger picture is that we have not addressed this country's original harms: Black people were stolen from their land; Indigenous people's land was stolen and they were harmed to the point of genocide. A portion of the country continues to prosper from that, without our true history being acknowledged or taught. How is anyone—educators, social workers, administrators, lawyers, psychologists—supposed to deal with the trauma they will encounter, if they are not prepared to address it? The trauma and the biases are just perpetuated."

Elze concurs that structural inequities are barriers to deeper integration of RP. "There's a lot of work to do around examining our own positionality. Especially, for example, in public school districts, where the majority of teachers are white—they need to be committed to examining their biases, behaviors, and feelings," she said.



The process can also help people learn about themselves; not all harms are intentional, and talking about it could help someone understand how a micro aggression or insensitive remark may have been perceived.

Elze has also been at the forefront of developing an internal RP process for the school, intended for responding to racism and other forms of oppression experienced by students. The school's process, as defined by a year of collaborative exploration and planning, is outlined in a five-page document that is in the MSW Student Handbook and the Field Education Manual. It begins with this paragraph:

*[UBSSW] students may experience or witness racism, heterosexism, cissexism (i.e., oppressive behavior and policies targeting transgender/*

*non-binary people) and other forms of oppression in their classroom and/or field placement. These incidents could involve faculty, staff, field liaisons, field educators, or other students. The UBSSW is committed to addressing these incidents in a trauma-informed and restorative manner when they occur.*

"Over the years, we heard from more and more students about experiencing forms of oppression in their field placements and within the school, explained Elze, who is also associate dean for academic affairs. "We realized that it was important to have a restorative process to address those situations. We use it to try and keep those who feel harmed and those who did (or are perceived as having done) the harm in relationships with each other. Another strong tenet of the process is that it must be mutual and voluntary. Within it, each tells their story; there can be an element of consciousness raising, a feeling of becoming connected."

Prior to the pandemic, Elze and Thompson's work resulted in an annual, community-inclusive Restorative Justice Day that took place for four years, and that involved multiple units on campus and community organizations. They remain committed to deepening RP wherever and whenever they can, whether through efforts with the Buffalo Public Schools to support the practices being implemented, creating a deeper relationship between the UBSSW and the ECRJC, and encouraging more social workers to learn about and use RP. •

## A CASE STUDY

*Dina Thompson, executive director of the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition, tells a story that illustrates how RP can work. "When the coalition was being formed and we were preparing to offer the RP course at the UBSSW, we attended a lot of community meetings around UB South Campus," she said. "During this process, we learned that, after a huge off-campus fraternity party, students were accused of stealing ornaments from a neighbor's garden. So we were able to do some healing work with neighborhood and campus.*

*A UB security guard actually came up with the idea to do a [restorative-style] conference. Everyone was willing to participate; with community business and nonprofits participating in the discussion. Everyone came together, and the harmed person told her story, saying that she valued her ornaments very much because they were inherited. And the young man who did the harm listened, and was remorseful. They agreed on a solution: he would mow her lawn, and do other volunteer work in the neighborhood. It was so successful, and it became so impactful that there was a ripple effect; the entire fraternity began volunteering in the neighborhood. Before that process, they all hadn't realized the value of the community.*

# Why I'm Here:

## STUDENT PROFILE:

### Jessica Mencia, MSW/PhD program, MSW '21

By Jana Eisenberg

**D**uring the pandemic, as Jessica Mencia got deeper into her PhD work, she kept in mind what she'd heard during her MSW coursework at UBSSW. "I remember what Joyelle Tedeschi (Joy), the instructor of our Community Social Work course, said about community integrated research. She'd remind us to not get caught up in only being a researcher; when looking for solutions or interventions, we also need to ask people what they need."

"I discovered that I like working with younger adults, teenagers/adolescents," Mencia said of her current focus on those populations' sexual risk-taking behaviors during the pandemic. "People that age often don't feel heard. During my research I'm asking people to tell me their stories. When they do that—especially young people, women and non-binary youth—they make themselves vulnerable; Joy reminded us that it's important to honor them. Many who I've interviewed say they feel validated, and that's also important to me."

Mencia, who grew up in North Carolina, was not originally thinking about a PhD in social work. Her interest in public health led her to a University of North Carolina Chapel Hill undergraduate program; she majored in public policy. As the first in her family to earn a college degree, and a Latina, she felt connected to the subject matter.

"Policy coursework felt tangible; I understood the issues, and through the program, I gained skills to do something about it," she said. "I want to make change and make a difference; I saw privileged people making decisions that affected others and wanted to see more marginalized people at the table."

While at UNC, Mencia volunteered for the Carolina Abortion Fund, a nonprofit, confidential, toll-free helpline providing financial, practical, and emotional support to callers in North and South Carolina trying to



access abortion care. "When I was younger, abortion—rights, access, etc.—was not spoken about as openly," said Mencia. "But adults in my life made sure I understood that it was crucial to support people in those rights."

As part of the McNair Scholars Program, which works to increase graduate degree awards for underrepresented students, Mencia decided to pursue a PhD. (Like most fields, social work PhD programs require that those pursuing the degree must have a Masters to apply.) She discovered that Buffalo, and the UBSSW program's dual MSW/PhD program, would be a good fit. She moved from North Carolina to Buffalo in late 2019, and earned her MSW in 2021.

The MSW program gave her valuable insight. "Policy work tends to be macro-focused, with a broad perspective, so in my first MSW year, it was nice to get some micro skills, like one-on-one counseling," she said.

The next year of the MSW program expanded her knowledge and experience. "Learning about

community social work was applicable to my interests. Thinking about how, as researchers, we are strangers coming into communities," said Mencia. "In one of my favorite courses, we worked with Gay & Lesbian Youth Services Western New York, researching what queer students in rural WNY needed to feel safe. It felt good to ask the community the what they need, rather than imposing it."

Her initial PhD research remained focused on abortion rights, informed by her time at the Carolina Abortion Fund. "Being part of the call line; seeing the number of callers, and hearing some of their stories, made me realize these intersecting barriers affecting people; and seeing how set some people—and policies—were on making it inaccessible."

UBSSW's faculty and school culture have added to Mencia's positive experience. "I've connected with a lot of people—faculty, advisors and students," she said. "The school's general culture is very curious; it's nice to have people interested in your research. It can be scary to come into a new program. I found the UBSSW PhD students very supportive; they want to make sure that others succeed."

"Advisors and faculty have also looked out for me. Through the program and its fellowship, I've had opportunities to travel and present at conferences; to share my research with an even larger community," she said.

Mencia's direction for her dissertation is shifting to her more recent interest, sexual risk-taking in young women and non-binary youth during covid. But her longer-term goals still hearken back to her original motivation for starting her higher education journey: advocacy and research, possibly working for a research institution or think tank. "I want to be involved with government policy," she said. "Maybe it's social work with a policy twist. I want to make sure that the research I do is accessible to the communities it impacts."





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