

MOSAICS



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DEAN'S COLUMN



It's an honor to be writing to you — and serving as dean — during the School of Social Work's 90th anniversary. For 90 years, the school has been advancing the dignity and worth of humankind and making a positive difference in our professional practice and research endeavors. Likewise, we remain steadfast in our commitment to trauma-informed care and respect for human rights. Diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility are cornerstones of our school.

One way we have been able to thrive for nearly a century is by continually updating our programs and cocurricular opportunities in response to student needs and trends. Today, one of our many points of pride is our new virtual Paths to Macro Social Work Alumni Series, created to deepen our students' understanding of macro practice and related career prospects.

Organized by Clinical Associate Professor Michael Lynch, MSW '10, the series engages alumni nationwide in sharing their career stories steeped in social work traditions via macro practice. Danial Khan, MBA/MSW '21, kicked off the series last year by discussing financial social work. Later, Jack Kavanaugh, MSW '15, Kate Mini Hilliman, MSW '17, and Jennifer Dunning, MSW '09, described their work in nonprofits, public health and politics, respectively. You can catch up on many of these talks on our YouTube channel at youtube.com/ubsswmedia.

The title of the wonderful talk by Aimee Neri, MSW '06, is particularly relevant: "Child Welfare

Systems: Micro Skills for Macro Change." She emphasized the transferrable nature of such foundational skills as active listening, reflective listening, the validation of feelings, effective use of silence and facilitative confrontation. Often, these skills are associated with micro practice, but clearly we should elevate these skills to bring about proactive change on a macro level.

Relationship-building is one of our best attributes, and macro practice certainly exemplifies connectivity. We simply partner with others on a larger scale. Likewise, when we work directly with individuals and families, we must put the macro in micro practice by advocating for their needs and working to improve the systems, communities and organizations they touch.

In this issue, you'll find more examples of individuals using micro skills to make a profound impact, including two alumni who are making a difference at Goodwill of Western New York (pages 8-9). On pages 10-11, Adriana Ragland, MSW '18 — another past presenter in our Paths to Macro Social Work Alumni Series — shares her inspirational story of founding the Neurodiversity Network of WNY. Finally, our cover story (pages 4-7) explains why transportation is a human right and how several faculty, students and alumni are making change on this issue.

In camaraderie and solidarity,

Keith A. Alford, PhD, ACSW
Dean and Professor

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YEARS

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ON THE PODCAST

Social work and environmental justice

How can social workers connect the macro environment to our interventions? On a recent episode of inSocialWork®, MSW student Alisa Chirico discusses the intersection of environmental and social justice — and how social workers can be better change agents for those we serve.

Listen now at [inSocialWork.org](https://www.insocialwork.org).

“I can have a consciousness about how to be in the world, and I can bring that to my sessions with my clients, because all of my clients will be impacted by environmental issues.”

— Alisa Chirico, a UB MSW student and landscape architect



GOOD NEWS

UB students take top honors

Several School of Social Work students won national and statewide recognition for their work this year.

PhD candidate
Nicole Capozziello



won a doctoral fellowship from the Grand Challenges for Social Work for her work on environmental racism in Buffalo. Her dissertation will explore the experiences of East Side residents and how they feel vacant lots could be better used.

PhD candidate
Hannah Ginn



received the Doctoral Fellows Award from the Society for Social Work and Research. The award will support her dissertation, which examines how “capacity to sexual consent” policies limit the rights of women labeled with intellectual disability.

MSW student
Tyrone Reese



was named Student of the Year by the New York State Education Association for his strong academic achievement and leadership in the program.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

How language resources affect employment outcomes

Assistance from bilingual adults in a community increases the chances of employment for immigrant men who struggle with English proficiency — but does not play a similar role for women with the same language barrier, according to new UB School of Social Work research.

The study introduces the concept of “community-level language resources,” or the percentage of bilingual adults in a community among those speaking the same native language.

“This study calls attention to the importance of these community-level resources when developing policies for immigrant populations, like mandated language services and employment programs,” says Associate Professor **Yunju Nam**.

PhD candidate **Sarah Richards-Desai** added, “The gendered aspect of community language resources also indicates the need for gender-specific supports to promote immigrant women’s employment.”

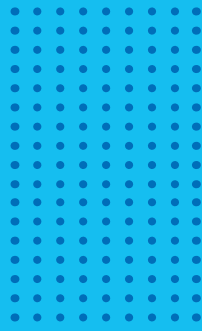


Nam



Richards-Desai

Transportation is a Human Right



Faculty, students and alumni make the case for transportation justice

BY MATTHEW BIDDLE

MSW student Tory Medley knows what it's like to rely on public transportation in a city like Buffalo.

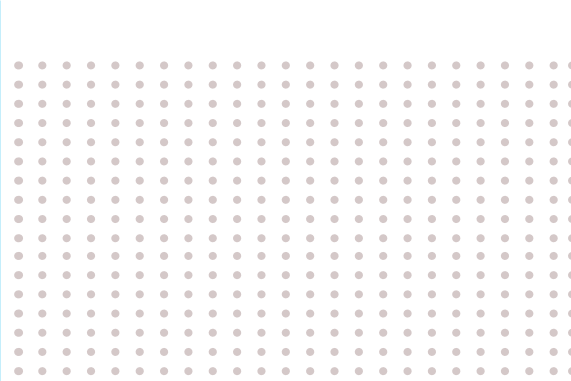
As a teenager, she received a free metro card to get to school but recalls times when she felt unsafe or would wind up late because a bus was full.

"It could be a sketchy walk just to get from the train station to school," she remembers. "You're walking down these back streets where most of the homes are abandoned. You have people selling drugs on the corners, and there were times people were robbed."

Later, as a young adult, she faced a common challenge: She needed a steady income to pay for her bus pass but needed public transit to get to work in the first place.

"There were plenty of times when I could not afford a bus ticket, so I would walk an hour to get to work in rain, sun, snow — you name it," she says. "It was very hard."

Though Medley now has a car and can move around with relative ease, she's still passionate about advocating for transportation as a human right. This winter, she spoke out during a local press conference on Transit Equity Day, a national day of action.



"I know kids who were let down by systems like this. If you're late to the bus stop or are a few minutes after your card expires, you're stranded. That's a terrifying experience for a child," she says. "We need to have these conversations so we can do better in the future."

Transportation affects nearly every aspect of our lives. We need a way to get to work or school, buy food and necessities, access medical care, connect with loved ones — the list goes on. Access to safe transportation is recognized as a social determinant of health by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and research shows that unreliable or inadequate transportation creates barriers to accessing employment, housing, fresh food and more.

Simply put, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares, "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state."

"Without affordable public transportation, our society is more unequal," says

Diane Elze, associate professor emeritus.

"Lack of access to transportation exacerbates racial and economic disparities in our country. When we look at the building of highway systems in this country, and how it destroyed Black neighborhoods, we can see that the lack of public transportation is grounded in white supremacy.

"Even more than a social determinant of health, transportation is a human right."



Barriers and disparities

Buffalo is one of the most segregated cities in America, a fact that came into stark focus in the wake of the racially fueled massacre at Tops in 2022.

A recent study by Partnership for the Public Good (PPG), for example, showed that Erie County residents of color are disproportionately concentrated in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods that suffer from disinvestments in basic infrastructure. More than 56,000 Buffalo households don't own a vehicle — but 58% of local jobs are beyond the reach of transit networks, according to PPG.

In her research, Associate Professor **Kelly Patterson** looks at how affordable housing policies affect residents' access to "valued resources," including employment and health care, particularly in shrinking cities like Buffalo.



"Many jobs have left urban areas and went out to the periphery or the suburbs, where people cannot easily access them," she says. This shift creates longer commutes for workers who live in cities, challenges for people who rely on public transit and an increased dependency on cars — all of which puts pressure on transportation systems and affects the environment.

Low-income populations also experience health disparities when they are limited by inadequate transportation and crumbling infrastructure in their own neighborhood.

"Because of poorly maintained roads, uneven sidewalks and broken streetlights, people in poor neighborhoods don't get the physical activity that many people in suburbs get for free because they can go for a walk or jog at all times of the day," Patterson says.

A recent Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study found that one in five Americans without transportation access — including a disproportionate percentage of Black adults — forgo medical care each year. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, about 23.5 million Americans live in a food desert, or a low-income area with limited mobility and grocery options. Patterson cites an example of an acquaintance who must take four buses to get to a store where they feel safe after the Tops attack.

As one policy solution, Patterson recommends building affordable housing near transit options and anchor institutions, like universities or hospitals, to encourage further development, like retail and cultural amenities.

She emphasizes, though: "Without affordable housing, people can be priced out of these growing neighborhoods. That's why a transit-oriented development strategy where

affordable housing is built near anchor institutions and transit hubs is better for low-income areas — creating more rail lines, bus stops and walkable neighborhoods.”

Assistant Professor **Amanda Aykanian** studies how a lack of mobility can hold people back as they try to exit homelessness. For one paper, she interviewed workers at homeless service agencies in 21 New York State counties, documenting hurdles in the housing process, which often necessitates moving to rural and other communities without public transit.

“Because the housing market in cities is usually expensive, you may need to look 30 to 45 minutes outside the city to house people in an affordable place,” she says. “But if you are putting them in a place that makes it even harder for them to stay connected to services, then you risk the fact that housing can be actually detrimental if it means having



less access to their mental and physical health care providers, sources of food, even friends and family.”

Though Medicaid can provide transportation for medical appointments, few providers offer solutions for other services or needs.

“Think about what your daily life looks like,” she says. “Whether it’s work, visiting friends, grocery shopping — most people cannot access those things in an easy walking distance, assuming you have the ability to walk a couple miles at all.”

Aykanian points to telehealth and co-locating services at community centers, like public libraries, as useful solutions. She also wishes more municipalities would provide free subway tokens to agencies for clients.

“It’s such an unnecessary barrier with an easy solution in a lot of ways. Providing more access is not a high-cost endeavor — it just requires political will,” she says. “The nice thing about transportation from a political perspective is that it’s a local issue, so you can contact your elected officials and elevate your concerns.”

Pushing for solutions

Holly Nowak, MSW ’17, has been on the front lines of this issue since she interned at the Coalition for Economic Justice (CEJ) in 2016 — the same year CEJ launched its Buffalo Transit Riders United (BTRU) campaign.

“Transportation is the difference between surviving and thriving,” Nowak says.

“Transportation justice intersects with just about any other kind of justice you can think of. It’s a class issue, it’s a race issue, it’s access to health care, child care and education.”

She’s now CEJ’s executive director, and BTRU has scored several major wins. Activists successfully pushed to change routes in Lackawanna to increase access, lobbied for a state law that requires every transit authority to grant voting rights on its board to someone who relies on public transit, and secured a daily and monthly cap on fares from the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA), which operates Buffalo’s metro buses and rail.

Transit Equity Day coincides each year with Rosa Parks’ birthday. Here, Tory Medley and Iris Marrano visit her portrait, painted by Julia Bottoms-Douglas, on the Freedom Wall in Buffalo. Photo: Olivia Marone.



Calculating the inequity

Suffering a time penalty

People who rely on public transportation waste a lot of time getting to work.



Who's being served?

32%

of transit riders were not satisfied with the region's public transit in the NFTA's latest survey.

33%

of households do not own a vehicle in most census tracts on Buffalo's East and West Sides.

58%

of jobs in Erie County are not accessible on public transit.

Sources: National Equity Atlas, PolicyLink, Partnership for the Public Good, The Buffalo News

Of course, there's plenty more to do. BTRU continues to fight for greater transparency, accountability and service at the NFTA, as well as solutions to address the shortage of drivers.

As a field intern at CEJ this year, MSW student Iris Marrano has supported BTRU's advocacy efforts by assisting with grant writing, promoting events, drafting letters to policymakers and more. She's also seen the impact of this issue firsthand as a mobile counselor at BestSelf Behavioral Health.


"I go to people's homes who don't have a lot of access or ability to get out. But when they do need to go places, it's challenging because they can't always rely on buses to show up, and the conditions getting to a bus stop may not be accessible or safe for people who are differently abled," she says. "Clients may go without physical health appointments for a long time because of stress related to accessing transportation."

As part of her field placement, Marrano helped to organize the Transit Equity Day celebration, which Tory Medley spoke at, to push for more equitable, accessible and functional transit options for all. She also attended the World Bank's Transforming Transportation conference in Washington, D.C., which centered on climate action in the transit space.

The entire experience has fueled Marrano's passion for working with vulnerable communities — and advocating for positive change at a macro level.

"In an ideal world, transit would be fair-free, which some places are doing, and the designers would work directly with people using the transportation before implementing changes," she says. "We're also a very racially segregated city, and we need to realize transportation is a racial issue and treat it as such to make some progress." ●

From left: Kelly Zaky, MBA/MSW '22, current MBA/MSW intern Janelle Valentine, and Cassidy Malough, MBA/MSW '21, at Goodwill of Western New York. Photos: Stephen Gabris

A photograph of three young women in a store, likely Goodwill. The woman on the left is sitting in a wooden chair, wearing a light blue top and dark pants, holding a gold Oscar statuette. The woman in the center is standing, wearing a brown jacket and a brown top, holding a red acoustic guitar. The woman on the right is sitting in a wooden chair, wearing a blue top and dark pants, with a small dog on her lap. The background shows shelves with various items, including a sign that says "housewares".

Implementing positive change

UB's MBA/MSW program provides social workers with business skills – and vice versa

BY JANA EISENBERG

From a distance, social work and business can seem far apart, like incompatible “apples and oranges.” UB’s MBA/MSW students see things differently.

Jointly offered by the School of Management and School of Social Work, the MBA/MSW program helps students become change agents with competencies in leadership, teamwork, strategic thinking and communication. Graduates leave the dual degree program with the skills to manage service agencies, create new programs and provide social and economic value.

At Goodwill of Western New York, several recent grads illustrate the significant impact MBA/MSW alumni can make.

Cassidy Malough, MBA/MSW '21, opted for the dual degree after working at a nonprofit.

“I wanted to broaden what I was doing,” Malough says. “I was leaning toward becoming a sole practitioner, but I didn’t have the business acumen. I ended up loving my MBA coursework and realized that social work and business could benefit from each other’s mindsets.”

After graduating, she joined Goodwill as a senior manager for its Goodskills Career Builder program, a free workforce training program that prepares individuals for careers in advanced manufacturing and technology.

“Goodwill is a great example of an organization integrating both perspectives,” Malough says. “The work goes back to community, and it’s also a functioning business melding a social innovation model with the business necessities.”

Thomas Ulbrich, CEO of Goodwill of WNY and an executive in residence for entrepreneurship in the School of Management, agrees that the combined skill- and mindsets work well in a variety of settings.

“MBA/MSW graduates bring a unique perspective to a nonprofit. They have a good understanding of how to balance the human focus of social work with the operational excellence needed to run a business,” he says. “Cassie has used parts from both disciplines in building programs, managing budgets and managing people.”

Kelly Zaky, MBA/MSW '22, also came to the dual degree program after experience in a related field.

“I worked in nonprofits and witnessed a gap between those in administration and those who were client-facing,” Zaky says. “They had similar goals, but they didn’t ‘speak the same language.’”

While researching graduate programs, she learned that the MBA/MSW can open doors for graduates interested in opening their own practice, pursuing nonprofit management and beyond. “It felt like there would be more opportunities with knowledge in both sectors, as opposed to choosing just one,” she says.



“MBA/MSW graduates bring a unique perspective to a nonprofit.”

Thomas Ulbrich, CEO of Goodwill of WNY

Though her work with Goodwill’s Goodskills program is business-oriented, she is able to be more effective because she has a social work background too.

“During my MBA work, I took a data modeling course, learning how data can be applied within the social sector in beneficial ways,” Zaky says. “I now work in data analysis, and the information is used in reports, for funding and with measuring program outcomes.”

Ulbrich agrees: “Kelly uses skills from both disciplines and is becoming an excellent data analyst. Her work enables us to use deep data to track outcomes and progress, and to report out on and write new grants.”

And that “language barrier” Zaky had observed? “I can bridge the gap to help the client-facing team understand the importance of data, showing how we can be more efficient in serving clients,” says Zaky.

“Efficient data collection and analysis also supported our efforts to pursue another grant opportunity,” she explains. “The additional funding enabled us to triple the size of Goodskills, increasing its community impact.”

With new funds in place for Goodskills, the team was able to expand the program into Niagara Falls and Jamestown.

“Using more of our social work backgrounds, we had to research the areas — the populations, asking what they needed, how we could help, what barriers they face. Then we put the program in place,” Malough says. “It’s like solving a puzzle, getting the pieces to fit and finding what works.”

Today, Zaky continues to support Goodwill’s efforts to impact workforce development in the community with the power of data storytelling. She also is helping to prepare current student interns as their field supervisor.

Meanwhile, Malough recently accepted a new position as a project manager at M&T Bank, demonstrating the need for her dual skill set in other sectors.

“In my new role, I’m involved with community banking,” Malough says. “Even though it’s a bank, it’s more than just numbers; the output is still measuring how we’re helping the community, making sure we’re investing to positively impact people.” ●

Networking for Neurodiversity

One mom's advocacy becomes
a resource for other parents

BY DEVON DAMS-O'CONNOR

As the proverb says, "It takes a village to raise a child." But when Adriana Ragland, MSW '18, tried to find a support network to help her son with autism, that village wasn't there.

So, she built her own.

In 2019, Ragland founded the Neurodiversity Network of WNY, a nonprofit that advocates for the acceptance and belonging of neurodivergent individuals. The organization connects families and educators with advocacy groups and training to support neurodivergent children and adults. Through her work, Ragland is raising awareness about intellectual and developmental disabilities, promoting belonging and well-being, and challenging the status quo of local systems to prioritize equity and accessibility.

Ragland first noticed the existing gap in services when her son, TJ, was 4 years old. He attended a preschool for students with autism and joined an after-school program with typically developing kids.

"At that age, they start to put expectations on children to sit, listen and do what they're told," she explains. "He couldn't. He



Adriana Ragland with her son, TJ. Photos: Anne Perdziak, Groovy Chic Photography



didn't have the skills or understanding that the other kids had, and his after-school teachers just didn't have the training to support him."

Ragland set out to find training opportunities for early educators of children with autism — and found none. So she pulled TJ out of the program and started the Neurodiversity Network of WNY to provide that training.

Ragland's advocacy and drive was deeply informed by her early life, during which she developed a keen awareness of both resource gaps and of the people who worked hard to bridge those gaps. She grew up in poverty on the West Side of Buffalo. In high school, her mom enrolled her in a program at the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP), which offered her a job during the school year. There she learned about the food insecurity issues her family and neighbors experienced, what social justice looks like and the tremendous impact social workers can have on young people and communities.

As she neared the end of high school, MAP took her on tours to local colleges. She chose Niagara University, whose social work program focused on people in poverty. During her last year, Ragland gave birth to TJ and still graduated with her bachelor's degree in 2015, despite struggling without emotional support and reliable transportation and daycare.

After graduation, she spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA member working with immigrant and refugee families at Buffalo State's Community Academic Center and realized it would be tough to build a stable life for her son without a master's degree in social work. A friend recommended the UB School of Social Work, which was on the bus line, and she enrolled.

Graduate school as a single mom living in poverty was challenging. She worked as a graduate assistant to help



pay for school and to qualify for daycare assistance. At times, she didn't have enough money to pay the phone bill, so she missed calls to renew her SNAP benefits. TJ was diagnosed with autism at age 3 while Ragland was still in graduate school, which sent her searching for information, resources and reassurance.

"It was a relief to know what was going on and be able to research it," Ragland explains. "But when I started telling people, they all said what a long road of difficulty it would be. I started Googling what might be ahead, and it got scary. I realized I needed support groups with other parents who knew what was going on."

She found a parents' group and enrolled TJ in a preschool program at Buffalo Hearing & Speech Center, which uses the DIRFloortime® model, a trauma-informed intervention that embraces differences and prioritizes human connection. She also learned about the Neurodiversity Movement, which changed her perspective on the road ahead.

With a lot of self-advocacy and deep-seated determination, Ragland earned her master's degree in 2018, found full-time work and founded the Neurodiversity Network a year later.

In addition to raising TJ and building her nonprofit, Ragland works full time at People Inc. as a behavior intervention specialist. There, she provides support services to people with disabilities through functional behavior assessments, clinical plans, resources and accommodations families and individuals need to thrive.

Ragland says she's able to balance multiple caregiving roles because she prioritizes self-care — and because it's just who she is.

"I'm resilient," she explains. "Empathetic. Determined. Patient. I need to be all those things to work with people with disabilities all day at home and at work. My faith in God is a cornerstone of my life and adds depth and meaning to everything I do. I love to be knowledgeable and research what I don't know. I love connecting people and building community — it's the reason I'm here and being successful today." ●

Introducing the newest Grand Challenge

Patricia Logan-Greene, associate professor and associate dean for academic affairs, will co-lead the Grand Challenge to Prevent Gun Violence. The initiative is a new addition to the Grand Challenges for Social Work, which brings social workers together to address society's most pressing issues.

Firearms were the leading cause of death for U.S. children and teens last year, overtaking motor vehicle accidents, according to Logan-Greene.

"There have been a number of highly successful public initiatives, such as safer cars and safer car seats and mandatory seat belt use, that have kept kids safer in motor vehicles," she says. "But gun deaths are increasing for children, and it's because there is so much backlash against the analogous public health measures that might prevent gun violence."

Logan-Greene and her partners are already drafting an agenda for action.



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