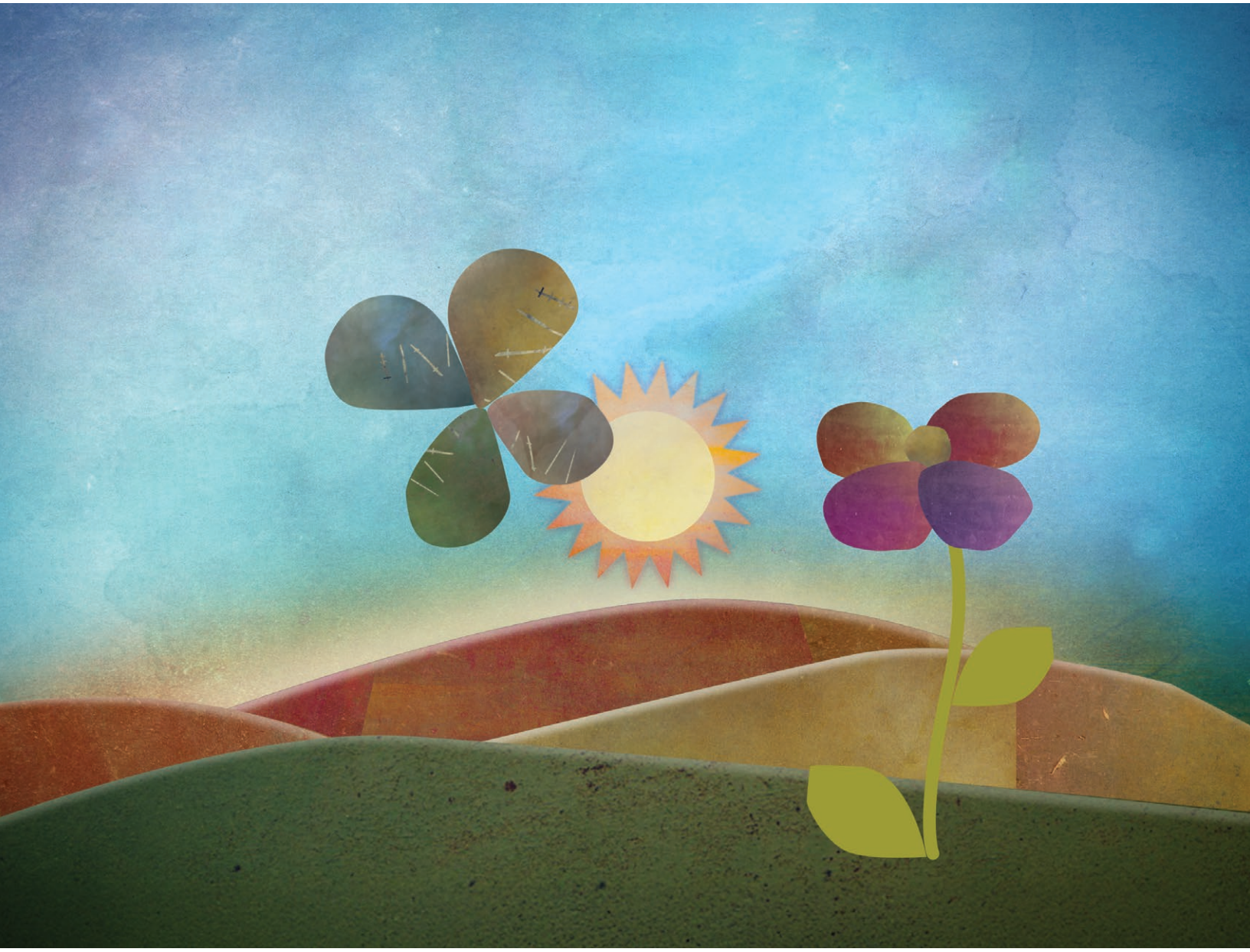
UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK SPRING 2025

MOSAICS



DEAN'S COLUMN

Dear Alumni and Friends,

"Get in good trouble, necessary trouble." — Rep. John Lewis

Lately I've been thinking about the late John Lewis, who risked his life and was arrested more than 40 times advocating for civil rights. From speaking at the March on Washington to leading hundreds across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on "Bloody Sunday" to supporting key legislation and voter registration drives during his decades in Congress, Lewis never considered his work to be heroic. To him, it was just necessary to move our nation — our society — toward justice.

Like some of us, Lewis could point to Buffalo and a formative experience he had here that set him on this historic path. When he visited here from Alabama at 11 years old, he said it was the first time he had experienced a desegregated society. "Going to Buffalo was when I realized that we live in one house as Americans and as humans in this world," Lewis wrote. We know communities across our country are always evolving, and good trouble means upholding human rights and championing the needs of those who are disenfranchised.

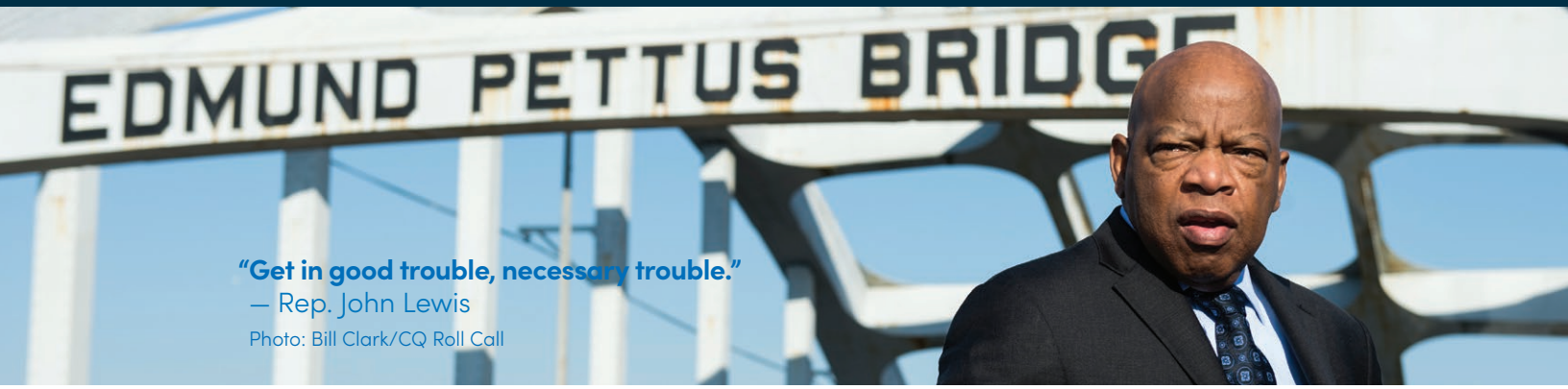
The past few months have been unsettling, with rapid changes that may have implications for our profession and the countless populations we serve. But as social workers, we understand better than most that if our shared "house" has a crumbling foundation, it hurts all of us, especially the most vulnerable. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Every day, I'm inspired by our school community and the good trouble our students, alumni, faculty and staff make through their efforts to advance the dignity and worth of humankind. In this issue, you can read a few examples: how a faculty researcher plans to train social workers in terrorism prevention (page 5); how four students are sharing resources through their podcast on intimate partner violence in the Black community (pages 8-9) and how the concept of tree equity inspired a recent graduate's research (pages 12-13).

As always, thank you for supporting the School of Social Work and our mission. Our necessary work continues together.

In camaraderie and solidarity,

Keith A. Alford, PhD, ACSW
Dean and Professor



"Get in good trouble, necessary trouble."
— Rep. John Lewis
Photo: Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

MOSAICS

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

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Proofreading: G&A Services Inc., Ann Whitcher Gentzke
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For an electronic version of this publication, visit **socialwork.buffalo.edu/mosaics**.

Send address changes and other correspondence by email to **sw-mosaics@buffalo.edu** or by mail to Editor, Mosaics, University at Buffalo, School of Social Work, 685 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260.

MEET THE TEAM

Welcoming two faculty members

The School of Social Work welcomed two new faculty members last fall: Clinical Associate Professor **Brenda McQuillan**, PhD, LCSW, and Assistant Professor **Enoch Azasu**, PhD.

McQuillan has over 25 years of experience as a social worker across multiple settings, including a school district, foster care agency, child and adolescent psychiatry outpatient clinic, juvenile detention center and children's advocacy center. She earned her PhD in health practice research from the University of Rochester. In addition to teaching full time at UB, she runs a private practice in Rochester, New York, and provides clinical supervision for emerging mental health therapists through a teletherapy agency in New York City.

"I am passionate about many things, all of which revolve around the dignity and worth of youth," McQuillan says.

Azasu centers his research on global mental health and suicide prevention, with a focus on understanding suicidality through culturally appropriate interventions. He earned his PhD in social work from Washington University in St. Louis. Azasu's research has been published widely in academic journals, and he has been honored with several awards and fellowships, including the Global Visionary Innovators Shaping Tomorrow's Advancements award from the National Institute of Mental Health, which recognizes mental health leaders who push the boundaries of knowledge.

"In addition to my passion around advancing mental health research, I am dedicated to community engagement through my work with organizations like Youth Awake to Mental Health Ghana and Youth Awake to Suicide," says Azasu.

Brenda McQuillan

Enoch Azasu

GOOD NEWS

Confronting barriers, increasing access

The School of Social Work has been awarded a $3.59 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop a fellowship for MSW students and increase the number of school social workers in rural areas.

This fall, the school plans to launch the Buffalo Mental Health Service Professional (MHSP) fellowship, in partnership with Erie 1 BOCES. Buffalo MHSP fellows will receive intensive training and coursework to address the mental health issues facing students and families in rural communities. Fellows will also complete their advanced year field placements in the Alden, Akron, Niagara-Wheatfield or Medina school districts.

A second component of the program, called UB STARS (Small Towns and Rural Schools), will recruit MSW students to UB from the participating rural communities, thus helping to grow the workforce pipeline from within each community.

"Compared to children in metropolitan and urban areas, children in rural communities have higher rates of depression, suicidality and other mental health conditions," says **Katie C. Stalker**, associate professor and director of field education, who serves as principal investigator on the grant. "This program prepares our MSW students for the unique concerns found in these rural schools."

Faculty members **Annahita Ball**, **Alexander Rubin** and **Michael Lynch** are also partners on the grant.

From left, Rubin, Stalker, Ball and Lynch. Photo: Meredith Forrest Kulwicki.

OUR SCHOOL

Celebrating 90 years

The School of Social Work has been advancing the dignity and worth of humankind since 1934. Last fall, we capped off our yearlong 90th anniversary celebration with a pair of events that brought together alumni, students, faculty, staff and community partners.

At left, award-winning professor, writer and media host Melissa Harris-Perry was the featured speaker for our 90th Anniversary Lecture and Celebration, sharing her perspective on the complexity of equity and how we can advance justice through social work.

Then, on a chilly November morning, below, we teamed up with the Tool Library to plant trees in Buffalo's McCarthy Park.

Photo: Heather Bellini

Photo courtesy of the Tool Library

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Grant-funded project aims to prevent targeted violence, terrorism

Patricia Logan-Greene

After the 2022 Tops mass shooting in Buffalo, Gov. Kathy Hochul signed an executive order mandating that all counties in New York State develop prevention networks to identify and confront threats of targeted violence. According to Associate Professor **Patricia Logan-Greene**, these networks will rely heavily on social workers and other behavioral health professionals, who have been called to engage in prevention efforts ranging from addressing community risk to rehabilitating radicalized individuals.

Funded by a $370,500 grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Logan-Greene is leading a project to assess current knowledge and practices around targeted violence and terrorism prevention and develop a series of online training programs for behavioral health workers across the state.

"We are in an era of rapidly increasing violence that is both targeted and politically motivated," she says. "When individuals and hate groups are empowered to violence, there's an increased need for trained professionals in the behavioral and mental health disciplines to prevent that violence, not only from those who are already radicalized, but also to strengthen communities and prevent future threats."

WHAT'S NEW

How to apply trauma-informed principles at work

Individuals can learn how trauma-informed principles can benefit employees across their organization, thanks to a new micro-credential program from the school's Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care (ITTIC).

Through the Foundations of Trauma-Informed Care micro-credential, participants will understand how trauma affects people and how they can be sensitive to trauma in their role and within their team or agency.

There are two ways to earn the micro-credential: by completing ITTIC's self-paced Basics for All Staff: Online Trauma-Informed Course, or by contracting with ITTIC for 12–15 hours of customized training for their organization. In both cases, participants will learn "trauma 101," develop strategies to implement a trauma-informed approach and demonstrate their new skills.

"During our trauma-informed care training, we had conversations about difficult topics, realized new things about ourselves, gained insight on how to manage others without doing additional harm, and received tools to meet others where they are in a compassionate manner," says Ericka White, benefits and wellness lead at Telamon, a North Carolina-based nonprofit.

For more information, visit **socialwork.buffalo.edu/ittic.**

Listen now at
inSocialWork.org

ON THE PODCAST

Social work in the post-Dobbs era

"Abortion is so stigmatized, controversial and a hot button issue that even social work has been hesitant to make it a primary component of the things we talk about and advocate for, even though reproductive health care affects everything."

— **Gretchen Ely,** professor and PhD program director at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, College of Social Work, during an episode on the state of reproductive health care more than two years after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

Nadine Shaanta Murshid holds a painting by her mother, Shameem Subrana, titled "Borders and Barricades." She chose the piece for her book cover because the rose bushes and barbed wire capture the tension she explores in the book: resilience and harm, love and violence.
Photo: Meredith Forrest Kulwicki.

Confronting the intimacies of violence

Murshid publishes new book BY DEVON DAMS-O'CONNOR

"Remember, you're not just any random woman. You are from Bangladesh. Some people won't know where it is. But that does not change you or your history. You come from a lineage of strong women. When in doubt, think of your grandmother who swam to safety during Partition. You took a plane. You have it slightly better. And you don't need no man."

That was Marium, recalling the words of her aunt in New York City when Marium moved in with her shortly after arriving in the United States, illustrating how family history, nationalist sentiment and cultural norms intersect to create complex roadmaps women are expected to follow.

She is one of the women we meet in *Intimacies of Violence*, a new book by Nadine Shaanta Murshid, an associate professor in the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, which studies how middle-class Bangladeshi migrant women personally embody structural violence to shed light on the ways in which violence is produced, perpetuated and resisted.

Murshid's career-long research has focused on partner violence. In this, her first book, she explores how transnational Bangladeshi women — individuals who occupy space in both the U.S. and Bangladesh — face cultural, social, gender and systemic inequities across borders.

"Ten years ago, I began looking at whether empowering women through microfinance helps them out of poverty and violence," Murshid explains. "The idea was that if women had the ability to leave, they could. There's this idea that only poor women experience violence. We know that partner violence happens across the class spectrum, but we only judge the poor women. I wanted to understand more."

She was also interested in Bangladeshi migrant women who were leaving partner violence, and what policies and resources exist. The women in her research conversations were middle-class migrants or children of migrants with some generational wealth and education.

Because they had certain class protections, they had parents who supported them post-divorce or the means to move away from a Bangladeshi community. While in theory these women could charter new paths elsewhere, Murshid discovered complexities that led many to stay in an unsafe relationship.

"I started a project about women who had sought help from agencies," she says. "What I was seeing was an assumption that these were empowered women, but what I found was the opposite — they were seeking help because the violence had gotten so bad."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Murshid began to wonder about the women she had gotten to know through nearly a decade of research.

"I started to think about some of the women I had spoken to, how they were and if there were more," she explains. "So, I reached out. What I heard was too much for a paper. In the time that had passed since we last spoke, a lot of them stayed, a lot of them left and there was a lot to talk about."

That's when her book began to take shape. Across eight chapters, *Intimacies of Violence* covers a lot of ground through four broad arguments.

First, it examines how social locations and associated status impact how women experience intimate inequities related to love, sex and desire. Second, the book shows how social norms within families link the structural and the intimate. Third, it illustrates how nationalist narratives about Bangladesh's history of wartime rape inform women's construction of violence. Finally, the institutions of home, immigration and the criminal legal system are implicated as sites of violence for transnational Bangladeshi women.

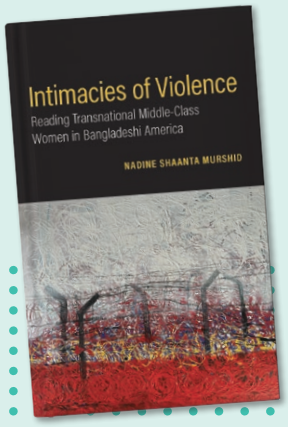
Murshid describes the people she met as women with identities and voices, sharing their backstories and often using their own words to describe their experiences.

"I wanted to paint these women as women with full lives, not women defined by violence, as victims," she says. "One important thing to do is to see victims as human beings."

Murshid hopes *Intimacies of Violence,* the first book to examine the private lives of Bangladeshi migrant women, will help practitioners understand the nuances of this community.

In writing the final chapters, another book began to show itself: *Intimacies of Migration*. This second book is a work in progress for Murshid, a continuation of some themes she began to unpack in *Intimacies of Violence* that merited their own volume. A publication date has not been set.

"All of this is a migration story," says Murshid. "It's a look at what creates the people who are here, how they make a home, how they bilocate and have expansive lives and have to navigate a variety of identities, class protections and norms."



Intimacies of Violence is available through Oxford University Press, Amazon, Barnes & Noble and eBooks.

A podcast with positive impact

PhD students produce new series on intimate partner violence

BY DEVON DAMS-O'CONNOR

Four friends sit in a recording studio, deep in discussion about topics considered taboo in some circles. They are Black women. They are scholars. And they are talking about intimate partner violence in the Black community in a way that's never been done before.

These women are the brains and voices behind a new podcast called BBRIDGE, which stands for Building Black Relationships by Initiating Development, Growth and Empowerment. Created by four doctoral students with intersecting academic interests, the show features research-based discussions about a complex topic that disproportionately impacts women of color, their families and communities.

Three of the creators are studying in the School of Social Work's PhD in Social Welfare program; the fourth is a PhD student in global gender studies in the College of Arts and Sciences.

"We did not want this information gatekept in academia."

— Jennifer Elliott, MSW '23, PhD student

Photos: Meredith Forrest Kulwicki

Jennifer Elliott, MSW '23, says the whole purpose of the show is to understand the myths and facts around intimate partner violence, its contributions to generational trauma, the complexity of the issue, and its physical, emotional and psychological impact on women. Discussions on the show and feedback from listeners also inform research and practice.

"From the first day of the doctoral program in theory class, we could see gaps in research and practice and interventions," explains **Ogechi (Oge) Kalu**. "We started asking, 'What do we do about this?' This podcast is allowing us to identify gaps, fill them with research and bring information and solutions back to the community."

As part of their PhD studies, all four hosts are studying a different, specific aspect of intimate partner violence. Elliott's research centers on cultural responsiveness from service providers and interventions for survivors. **Vanity Jones**, MSW '24, examines the long-term effects of intimate partner violence and its impact on intimacy and trust. **Joyce Adeola Jekayinoluwa** looks at gender-based violence toward African women, prevention and policy analysis. Kalu, who hosted a radio show in Nigeria before she got into social work, studies the impact of domestic violence on children, maternal mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Each show is based on the hosts' independent research, bolstered by examples from popular culture, peer-reviewed papers and anecdotes from the field. They say it's the first time these resources are being shared with the public in such a comprehensive and approachable way.

"We did not want this information gatekept in academia," explains Elliott. The podcasters designed the show to reach a broad audience, beginning first and foremost with Black women, and as Jones puts it, people in relationships with Black women. They're also speaking to service providers and community organizations that serve Black women and families.

While the topic is serious, the tone of the show is energetic, conversational and inviting to a variety of listeners.

"It's everybody's business," says Jekayinoluwa. "As much as we say it's for Black women, and it is — they're statistically at greater risk for intimate partner violence — we want everyone to hear it. We're talking to children to help them plan futures and define boundaries for themselves. Men, too, as partners, as allies, as victims themselves and as fathers of daughters."

The first three discussions centered around Elliott's studies. Episode one dove into common Black women tropes (like the jezebel, mammy and gold digger), their roots in history and how they impact the Black community. Then, the group tackled celebrity relationships and their role in modeling behaviors, and gender roles in relationships. Subsequent episodes went deeper into unhealthy and abusive relationships, as well as domestic violence during the holiday season.

Future topics will be derived from the cohosts' research interests and may feature guests, including academic colleagues and community partners.

The show, recorded on campus and edited by the self-taught team, is available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, with release announcements and discussion on Instagram (@bbridge_buffalo) and Facebook (Bbridge Buffalo). All four creators say they welcome feedback and questions about anything they cover during the show.

Despite juggling the rigors of PhD research, classes, jobs and lives, the BBRIDGE creators continue to release new episodes each month. It's a project Elliott says feels less like work and more like time spent with friends talking about things they're passionate about — because ultimately, that's what it is.

"Our topics and research can get dark," acknowledges Elliott. "So this show feels like self-care for us. We're friends, we're ourselves and we can joke, all while having a good discussion that benefits others in the community."

Changing what we cannot accept

How climate change may affect addiction recovery

BY MATTHEW BIDDLE
ART BY JON BONEBRAKE

As growing evidence shows that climate change will influence nearly every aspect of our health, Associate Professor **Elizabeth Bowen** is the first researcher to explore how climate change may affect individuals who are recovering from addiction.

In her study, Bowen uses the theory of recovery capital to outline how climate change could negatively affect recovery outcomes, including how marginalization because of race, income or age could magnify these effects for particular groups. While other studies have examined the effect of climate change on substance use rates, Bowen's work in *Addiction Research & Theory* is the first peer-reviewed article to look at its implications for addiction recovery.

"Though sometimes depicted as a single apocalyptic event, climate change is widespread and already affecting the health and livelihoods of many groups, including people who are in recovery," Bowen says. "With this paper, my hope is to spur urgently needed conversation and action among researchers, social workers, service providers and people in recovery."

Creating new and more difficult challenges

Recovery capital takes a holistic view on recovery, encompassing all the resources in a person's life that could support or hinder their journey to wellness. The theory was developed more than 20 years ago by Robert Granfield, professor of sociology and vice provost for faculty affairs at UB, and William Cloud, a retired professor in the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work.

In her paper, Bowen cites more than 75 health, recovery and environmental studies to identify links between climate change and the four domains of recovery capital: social (the people in your life), physical (your job, housing and other resources), human (individual attributes like health, education and attitudes), and cultural (traditions and community-level supports).

For example, as rising temperatures and sea levels make some areas uninhabitable, people may be forced to migrate, separating them from their social networks and disrupting access to health care and community-based services, including support groups.

Bowen describes how climate change threatens both physical and mental health — an effect that may be particularly severe for individuals in recovery who have chronic health conditions or mental health challenges. According to Bowen, about 38% of people in the U.S. with a substance use disorder also have a mental health diagnosis.

She also notes that climate change increases the likelihood of homelessness and cites a U.S. Congressional Research Service report that found climate change will decrease economic productivity and reduce earnings and employment in certain sectors.

"Recovery is significantly more difficult without safe and stable housing, adequate income, health insurance and reliable transportation," Bowen says. "Unfortunately, people with a history of substance use problems already experience greater employment discrimination and instability than the general population, so people in recovery will be especially affected by climate-related economic challenges."

Magnifying disparities

Throughout the paper, Bowen also looks at how individuals in recovery who already face systemic discrimination over their race, gender, age or other characteristics will likely feel the worst effects of climate change.

For example, according to Bowen, Indigenous people are particularly vulnerable to climate-related displacement — which adds to centuries of policies forcing Native people from their land, disrupting cultural traditions and contributing to the higher rates of alcohol or drug problems we see today in some Indigenous populations.

"People with the fewest resources and the least political power stand to lose the most to climate change," she says. "The climate crisis will only magnify the disparities that marginalized populations already face in recovery."

Bowen hopes her work inspires researchers and practitioners alike to take action to help individuals increase their recovery capital in the face of such challenges. To her fellow researchers, she suggests starting with the effects she identified to generate new hypotheses, prioritizing diversity to look at how the effects differ among specific populations and partnering with people in recovery as coresearchers.

"There's a well-known serenity prayer used in 12-step meetings that begins, 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,'" Bowen says. "By contrast, climate change is an urgent call to action to change what we quite literally cannot accept or live with, as a people and a planet." ●

Dive deeper

Watch our new video — animated by Jon Bonebrake — to explore Elizabeth Bowen's findings and ideas for action.

Photo: Meredith Forrest Kulwicki

"It's the roots that need water"

The process and potential of a community-based dissertation

BY NICOLE CAPOZZIELLO, PHD '25, MSW '20

I first learned of tree equity in 2022, when a conference presenter quoted the nonprofit American Forests, saying, "A map of tree coverage in the United States is too often a map of income and race."

As a PhD student, I was no stranger to inequity: studying it academically, working with people experiencing it and seeing it virtually everywhere. However, that inequity extended to the trees above our heads was a revelation — and one I couldn't forget.

These words echoed in my head as I walked around Buffalo's West Side, biked to work at Grassroots Gardens of Western New York on Broadway, east of Main, and drove to community gardens across the city. Wherever I went, I took stock of the trees: if they were there, what kind, their age, their health.

Not only did tree cover take on more meaning — and become an indicator of equity — but so did parks and the vacant lots I'd become all too accustomed to. I wondered how others experienced these things and if they too noticed blocks without trees, felt demoralized by vacant lots or went out of their way to pass a rosebush in bloom. These thoughts percolated in my mind as I refined the idea for my dissertation project.

Since beginning the School of Social Work's MSW/PhD program in 2018, I had heard the adage "a good dissertation is a done dissertation" countless times. It was a reminder to not get hung up on perfection. Beyond done, however, I wondered how my dissertation could be meaningful and make an impact. I knew I didn't want to produce something that was only interesting to me or within academia, but honing what I wanted to do was a challenge.

Over lunch, the late community leader Gail Wells, who later became a study participant, told me: "People know they want their neighborhoods to be better,

to be different, but we don't paint a picture broad enough of what spaces could be. If you can't imagine something, how can you build it?" Gail's visionary outlook compelled me to go beyond examining problems and center the act of exploring possibilities in my research.

Other people's experiences of research as tedious or extractive motivated me to create a process that would be enjoyable, with outputs that participants could see themselves in. To this end, I began by giving participants the option to use their real name and be identifiable in photos.

As I developed my dissertation project, I was fortunate to have a committee — composed of my chair Elizabeth Bowen and Mickey Sperlich, associate professors in the School of Social Work, and Lourdes Vera, assistant professor in the College of Arts and Sciences — that encouraged the community-based and creative elements of my study.

My ideas ultimately became "'It's The Roots That Need Water': A Community-Based Case Study Exploring Buffalo East Side Residents' Experiences of Nature and Vacant Land." Through interviews, neighborhood walking tours and a participatory design studio, I asked East Side residents to reflect on their experiences of nature past and present, as well as their visions for the future.

Some of the study's findings were predictable, such as the role of nature in people's well-being throughout their lives. People vividly recalled playing in parks, eating fruit from Masten's bountiful trees and learning to garden.

Other results were unexpected and complex. For instance, I was surprised by the omnipresence of gentrification, as both a lived experience and concept. Lorraine, who had lived most of her life in the Cold Springs neighborhood, told me: "No matter if it's Buffalo, Philadelphia, Detroit, they're all the same issues. Because living where we live — the city — it's fine real estate. And little by little, we are being squeezed out."

Participants also lived with a constant tension between hope for their communities and cynicism after years of dealing with the city. Gerldine, an East Side resident for over 20 years, expressed, "In an ideal world, you'd want a city that would understand that it's better to have a community garden or a group of neighbors that are working on a property than to just leave it."

I was constantly awed by the thoughtfulness of participants who generously and enthusiastically guided me through their memories, neighborhoods and hopes. When I went back to share preliminary results and ask for feedback, a practice called member checking, our conversations were full of clarifications, additions and follow-up with relevant resources.

Though its impacts are still emerging, I am proud to say that my dissertation is both done and meaningful. I hope this work will contribute to a better understanding of East Side residents' experiences, fuel the adoption of comprehensive vacant lot policy and create more opportunities for genuine collaboration among community members and researchers, urban planners, politicians and others.

Whether it's a community-based dissertation, better policy or a community garden, creating something is hard work that's only possible with connection and creativity. And, as Gail showed me, there is value in both imagining and building. ●

A recent graduate, Nicole Capozziello completed her dissertation in December and was honored with an Excellence in Research award from the School of Social Work's Buffalo Center for Social Research. She is now pursuing a career in policy and communications, informed by her background in community social work and community-based research.

During walking tours with her participants, Capozziello took photos to document her research. Pictured, from top, are an East Side lot, the abandoned Willert Park housing project and a lot in the Broadway-Fillmore neighborhood.

Photos: Nicole Capozziello

When disaster strikes

How School of Social Work alumni and faculty help families and communities rebuild

BY MATTHEW BIDDLE

Tara Hughes, LCSW-R, has met countless people on the worst day of their lives. Since 2002, she has responded to house fires, mass casualty events and natural disasters across the country as a disaster relief volunteer for the American Red Cross.

For example, in 2007, she was deployed to Enterprise, Alabama, where a tornado ripped through a high school and killed eight students. Hughes trained staff on psychological first aid so they could help students through the trauma and be ready for school at an alternative site.

"If you can immediately provide psychological first aid for people, their long-term mental health needs go down drastically. If I put a Band-Aid on a cut, I won't get infected — that's the same way you think about this," explains Hughes, a longtime School of Social Work adjunct instructor, who created the Red Cross' local internship program and supervised many UB MSW students before relocating to Maine.

Over the years, Hughes has advanced from volunteering as a disaster mental health responder to managing disaster mental health teams — to leading as the assistant director for operations at a disaster site, charged with "overseeing everything that touches people, from feeding and housing to spiritual care, disability integration, nurses and disaster mental health."

For instance, after Hurricane Laura in 2020, she ran efforts to provide temporary housing, food, case management and mental health services for 46,000 displaced people in two states, while addressing public health concerns amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hughes is also a recognized subject matter expert on mass casualty response, both for the Red Cross and in her full-time role as director of the National Training and Technical Assistance Center within the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. In both roles, she has coordinated high-level response programs and supported communities facing unthinkable tragedies — like the Boston Marathon, Pulse nightclub and Pittsburgh synagogue shootings — through the immediate aftermath and their long-term needs.

Across all disasters, Hughes says most people's reaction to extreme stress is predictable, and easing that stress can significantly reduce the number of people who will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression or other issues in the weeks to come.

"When we experience something big and unexpected, we often react in ways we don't understand. Maybe you don't sleep, crave sugar or ask big questions, like 'Why did God let this happen?'" Hughes says. "You feel like you're broken, and it's hard to take functional actions — move into a temporary apartment, put your kids to bed — when your brain tells you that you're broken."

Above:
Tara Hughes speaks to media about how neighbors can take care of their mental health after the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013. Photo: Jay Bonafede, American Red Cross.

Right:
Carol Whitlow gets ready to help during one of her 25 Red Cross deployments.

She continues: "Through disaster mental health, I can say, 'All of that is predictable,' and 99% of the time, the relief on the person's face in front of me is astronomical. The fact that I can provide relief for someone who's just had the worst day of their life will always keep me coming back to this work."

A long process

The American Red Cross is mandated by Congress to provide disaster relief services. Through its Disaster Cycle Services team, the Red Cross helps people prepare for, respond to and recover from every kind of disaster, from single-family house fires to earthquakes, blizzards, wildfires and beyond.

Volunteers make up more than 90% of the Red Cross workforce — and, because of the climate crisis, their work is more critical than ever. In 2024 alone, there were 27 disaster events exceeding $1 billion in losses in the United States, just missing the record of 28 set the previous year, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Globally, climate-related disasters have doubled in the last 20 years, and the most vulnerable will suffer disproportionately from the increasing frequency and intensity of these hazards, according to the United Nations.

Carol Whitlow, LCSW, MSW '06, is one such volunteer who has deployed with the Red Cross to 25 disasters over the past 25 years. In 2006, her first deployment found her only 100 miles from home in Ithaca, New York, helping a rural community recover from a major flood.

Since then, Whitlow has provided mental health support and resources after floods in Texas and wildfires in Colorado, and she was on hand when the 9/11 Memorial & Museum opened in New York to support the victims' families and first responders.

In Oklahoma, Whitlow traveled with a nurse and damage assessor to provide counseling for families in rural communities affected by a series of tornadoes. One family she met had been living in a mobile home while constructing a new house on their property, but that house had been destroyed by the storm.

"He said, 'I'm not sure I want to build again,'" Whitlow recalls. "It not only took away his property but also his ability to see positive in the future. People don't just bounce back immediately. They have to reattach themselves little by little to their life and their community."

Most recently, she spent four weeks in Lahaina, Hawaii, in November 2023 and January 2024, following the 2023 wildfires. While helping to staff a multiservice center, Whitlow provided on-site mental health support and child care.

"Even after months, people were still reeling from the immensity of the loss," she says. "People have lasting trauma from those experiences and may have flashbulb memories or triggers. A woman told me she couldn't watch a sunset because the colors reminded her of the fire. It's a long recovery process for people."

Showing up

Back in Buffalo, Julianna Stella, MSW '19, serves as senior disaster program manager, overseeing both volunteers and paid staff for disaster services across the Red Cross' 27-county Western New York region. Stella joined the organization as one of Hughes' MSW interns, came on full time after graduation in 2019 and has since received several promotions.

"We're the largest humanitarian organization in the world," Stella explains. "The hope is that our recovery team can work with the family to get them as close to their pre-disaster situation as possible."

To do so, Stella says the organization takes a holistic approach, working with clients to implement a recovery plan that covers their financial, emotional, physical, mental and spiritual needs. The Red Cross Disaster Action Team (DAT) will arrive on scene shortly after the first responders to help address the victims' immediate needs and begin the client intake process.

Locally, Stella's team most often responds to house fires, followed by snowstorms and flooding. She also vividly recalls the racist Tops massacre of 2022, when her team was on site for weeks connecting neighbors with services, serving meals and working with local agencies and officials to guide the community's long-term recovery.

"The community really came together during the tragedy," Stella says. "That resiliency doesn't take away what happened, but you see there are good people in the world. As long as there are good people doing this work, it can't be all bad."

Stella shared that sentiment recently with her MSW interns. As a School of Social Work field educator, she has supervised several MSW students since 2020, including Liz Hall, MSW '25, who completed her foundation year placement with the Red Cross and stayed on for a second placement this year.

During her first year, Hall responded to local disasters with the DAT, managed a caseload of families through their recovery and provided CPR training at local schools and community centers. As an advanced year student, she's taken on additional responsibilities with her caseload, including coordinating with community and government agencies for clients, and used her marketing skills to create infographics on preparedness skills.

Across both years, Hall also collaborated on a "legacy project" with Clinical Assistant Professor Tonya Myles-Day, working to adapt a diversity, equity and inclusion training that Myles-Day developed and deliver it for all local Red Cross staff and volunteers.

"Working here has definitely challenged me to step out of my comfort zone," says Hall, explaining how disaster response requires quick thinking and immediate solutions. "I've learned to use my voice more and gained a deeper understanding of myself and how I want to show up in different environments."

Like Stella, Hall says that while their work can be stressful, even devastating at times, the ability to support families through their worst moments makes it all worthwhile.

"That's what really drew me in to this job — I wanted to be able to make a difference in people's lives every day," Hall says. "Things can happen in a snap, but we're the ones who get to show up and help." ●

"The community really came together during the tragedy. That resiliency doesn't take away what happened, but you see there are good people in the world. As long as there are good people doing this work, it can't be all bad." — Julianna Stella, MSW '19

From left, Liz Hall and Julianna Stella at the Red Cross' Western New York Chapter headquarters. Photo: Stephen Gabris.

Downward dog

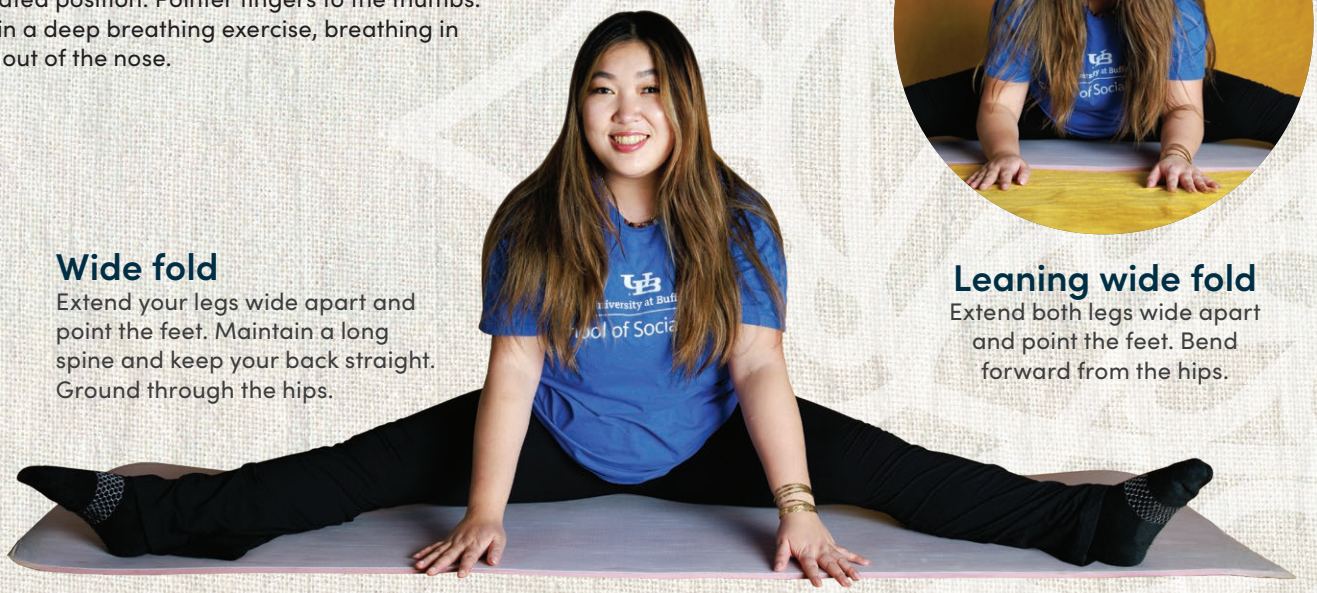
Come onto all fours. Spread your fingers wide and press firmly into the palms. Lift your hips toward the ceiling. Keep a slight bend in the knees. Keep a long and straight spine, aligning your head.

Side stretch

Bring one leg in while keeping the other leg extended. Reach your hand over your head toward your extended leg for a side stretch. The other hand reaches toward your toes.

Lotus pose with hand mudras

Find a comfy position on your mat and come into a seated position. Pointer fingers to the thumbs. Begin a deep breathing exercise, breathing in and out of the nose.



Wide fold

Extend your legs wide apart and point the feet. Maintain a long spine and keep your back straight. Ground through the hips.

Leaning wide fold

Extend both legs wide apart and point the feet. Bend forward from the hips.

Chair look down

Widen your legs to either side of your body. Use your hands to push the knees outward. Gently look up and down to stretch out the neck.

Chair seated forward fold

Adjust the space between your legs as needed. Gently hinge the upper body forward and bring your hands down toward the floor.

Chair extended leg side stretch

Extend one leg out and reach toward your ankle for a side stretch. The opposite hand slides to rest on your thigh.

Slowing down with yoga

BY TIFFANY J. NHAN, MSW/PHD STUDENT
PHOTOS BY STEPHEN GABRIS

Yoga has been life-changing for me, and making yoga more accessible is a lifelong goal of mine.

I have practiced yoga for the last decade and have taught for the last three years as a 200-hour registered yoga teacher. I have experience integrating yoga for marginalized communities through teaching free Fitness in the Park classes, creating a trauma-informed yoga curriculum for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) youth, and volunteering my time to teach yoga for BIPOC communities.

Here are some yoga poses you can do from the comfort of your own home or even in your office.

View more poses on our website at socialwork.buffalo.edu/mosaics-yoga

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UB researcher, Western New York agency win $208,000 NIH prize

Mickey Sperlich, associate professor in the UB School of Social Work, and the Buffalo Prenatal-Perinatal Network (BPPN) are helping improve maternal health outcomes in Western New York.

They received a $208,000 prize from the National Institutes of Health IMPROVE initiative, which supports research to reduce preventable causes of maternal deaths and improve health for women before, during and after pregnancy. The funding will allow the team to hire a licensed clinical social worker at BPPN and advance the Survivor Moms' Companion, an evidence-informed intervention that Sperlich co-created for new and pregnant mothers with a history of trauma, sexual abuse or violence.

"It's been my life's work to address trauma in the perinatal period," says Sperlich.

Read more at **socialwork.buffalo.edu/bppn**

Hello!

Read Class Notes online

Catch up on what your fellow alumni are up to: **socialwork.buffalo.edu/classnotes-spring25**

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