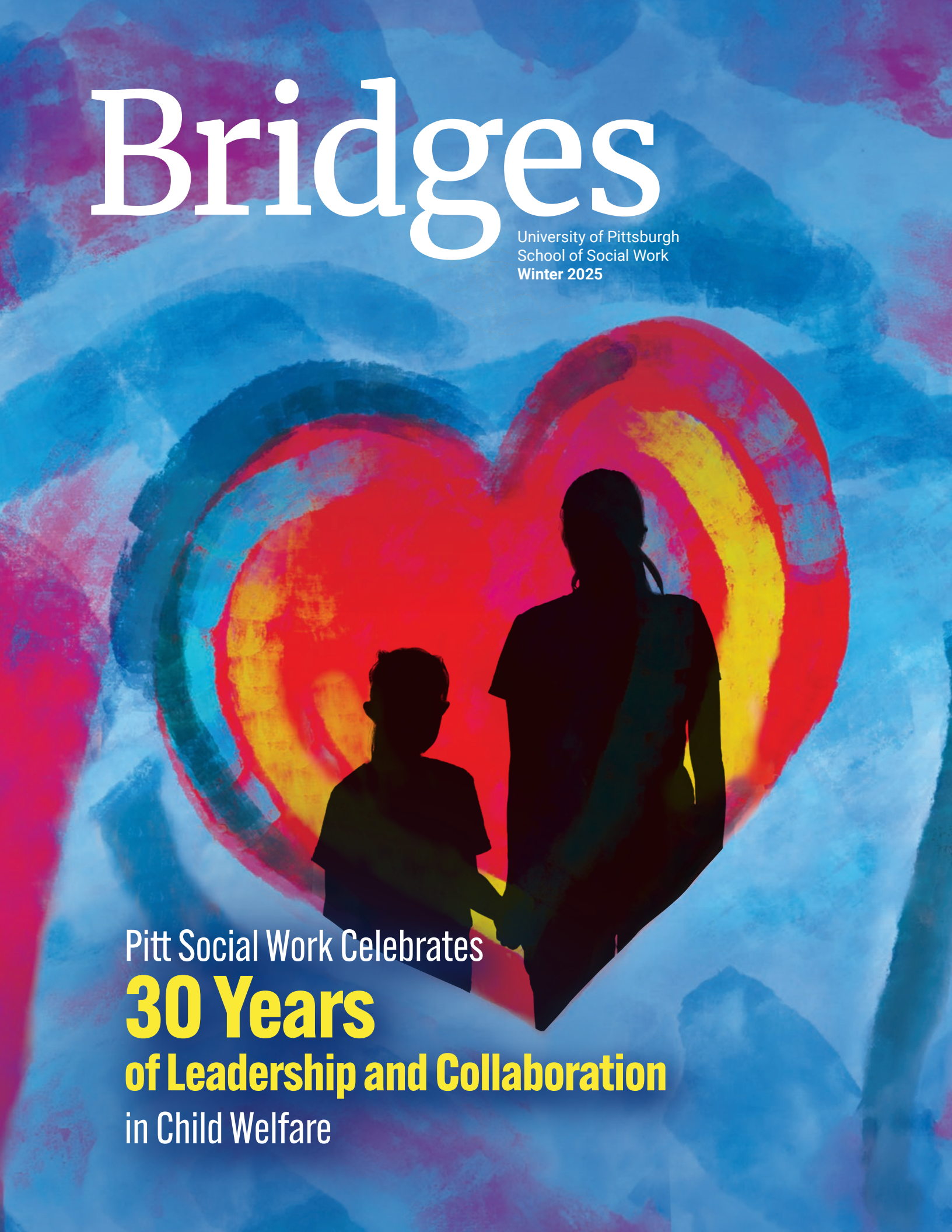
Bridges

University of Pittsburgh
School of Social Work
Winter 2025



Pitt Social Work Celebrates

30 Years

of Leadership and Collaboration

in Child Welfare

Bridges

Bridges is the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work alumni magazine. We selected the name Bridges largely because of its symbolism. The term provides an important metaphor for both our profession and our school. Social work is a profession that has, as part of its mission, the goal of building and sustaining bridges among individuals, families, groups, neighborhoods, and communities, and we felt that the title Bridges captured this part of our professional mission. At the same time, the city of Pittsburgh has more than 450 bridges, and Allegheny County has almost 2,000, suggesting an uncompromising desire of the city's inhabitants to remain connected with one another. In keeping with this heritage, it is the school's goal to sustain and build bridges among those needing social work services; our students, alumni, faculty, and staff; the community; and corporate and governmental partners. We believe that the information in this magazine is an important way to achieve this goal.

CONTENTS

Features

Teller Lecture Addresses Intersection of Social Work and Climate Change 9

Pitt Social Work Celebrates 30 Years of Leadership and Collaboration in Child Welfare 10

The Power of Practicum 16

COSA Bridges Academic Learning With Real-World Community Engagement 20

Alumni Map: Staying Connected Across the Globe 22

Departments

School Updates 2

Student News and Awards 4

Faculty Grants 7

Alumni 24

In Memoriam 37

BRIDGES MAGAZINE CREATIVE TEAM

School of Social Work

Dean ..... Elizabeth M.Z. "Betsy" Farmer

Development Associate and Editor ..... Riley Belden-England

Director of Marketing and Communications ..... Shannon Murphy

Director of Development ..... Katy Gallmeyer

Office of University Communications and Marketing

Bridges magazine is published annually and is sent to alumni and friends of the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work.

University of Pittsburgh

2117 Cathedral of Learning
4200 Fifth Ave.
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

412-624-6304

socialwork.pitt.edu

Scan the QR code to update your personal or professional information!

The University of Pittsburgh is an affirmative action, equal opportunity institution. Published in cooperation with the Office of University Communications and Marketing. 114792-0225

Dear alumni, colleagues, and friends,

The years feel like they're flying by! When I came to the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work in 2018, I had no idea how much we'd accomplish and how exciting it is to be part of this school. I am infinitely grateful to be able to share some of what we're doing with all of you. I hope that you find some warm and fuzzy memories from some of what is included here and that you are inspired and invigorated by reading about this slice of what we're doing.

This issue centers on our work in the field of child welfare. Those of you who have been affiliated with the school over the past 30 years know how important our focus on child welfare is—for our school, our students, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the nation. Here we provide a brief overview of the incredible innovation, expertise, and persistence it has taken to build and grow the Child Welfare Education and Research Programs and to remind us of the myriad ways that these programs and efforts affect the lives of social workers, agencies, parents, and children. It is a truly wonderful component of our school, and I'm glad that we can reflect on and celebrate it here.

We also highlight the broad range of activities, initiatives, and impactful work that have been happening in the school over the past year. As you'll see, we are growing—with new staff and faculty, some of whom are alumni bringing their skills home to their alma mater, as well as long-standing colleagues who are helping us to expand our possibilities and impact in so many ways.

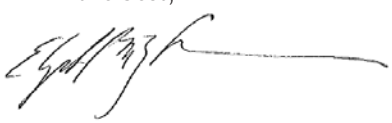
The school has a long and strong history in many areas of social work practice, research, and leadership. We were happy to see this reflected in the 2024 U.S. News & World Report national rankings, which placed us 12th among 319 MSW programs. We also are working to tell our story better and to help others better recognize who we are and what we do. We have long-standing excellence and a national reputation in the areas of race and social problems, mental health, and child welfare. We continue to excel in each of these areas and to grow our impact. From our recent $5 million National Institutes of Health grant to evaluate the Center on Race and Social Problems' Racial Equity Consciousness Institute, to our movement toward more explicit focus on the importance of lived experience in research and knowledge development, to our efforts for increasing our collaborations and impact in the world around us, Pitt Social Work continues to excel, partner, and lead. And we're working to expand long-standing strengths (e.g., community, organization, and social action and aging) and recognize the cross-cutting areas where we want to focus our efforts (e.g., caregiving, flourishing, and the role of social work in society).

As you read through these pages, I hope that you'll see our current faculty, staff, and students as well as yourself, your classmates, and your fellow alumni engaged in a rich array of work and initiatives that make you feel connected, empowered, and in awe of what we can do. As I look at everything that we're doing—in the school, within our alumni network, in our respective communities and spheres of influence—it inspires me to make sure that we recognize the importance of all that we do, that we see the forest (and don't get tripped or distracted by the trees), and that we take a few moments to genuinely reflect on and celebrate all that we're doing. As we enter 2025, I can't think of a better place to be or a better group of people to be connected with. Thank you all for what you bring to our community, impact, and possibilities!

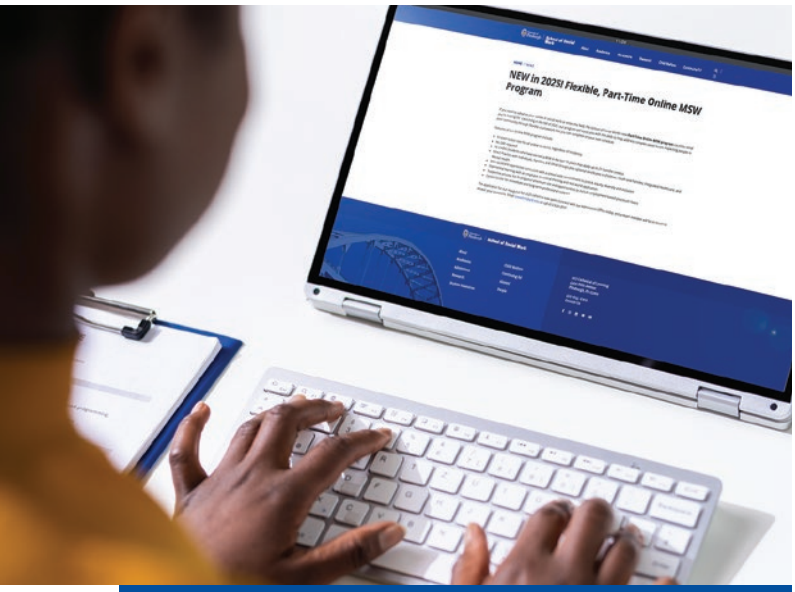


Finally, to our alumni reading this, please remember all the ways that you can continue to be part of the school. We are grateful for your engagement as practicum supervisors, part-time faculty members, partnering colleagues, and supporters who allow us to nurture the next generation of excellent practitioners, researchers, organizers, innovators, and transformative leaders. We also want to hear from you so that we can include your accomplishments and ideas in our subsequent materials. If you have suggestions or items for future newsletters or issues of Bridges, please send them to Riley Belden-England at sswalums@pitt.edu. We would love to hear from you!

All the best,



Elizabeth M.Z. "Betsy" Farmer
Dean, School of Social Work
University of Pittsburgh



Online Program Update

New in 2025: Flexible Part-time Online MSW Program

If you want to advance your career in social work or enter the field, the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work's new **part-time online MSW program** could be what you're looking for. Launching in the fall of 2025, our program will equip you with the skills to address complex social issues impacting people in your community through flexible course work that you can complete on your own schedule.

- In-state tuition rate for all online students, regardless of residency
- No GRE required
- Specialization in direct practice with individuals, families, and small groups
- Optional certificates in children, youth, and families; integrated health care; and mental health
- Anti-racist/anti-oppressive curriculum with a schoolwide commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion
- Experiential learning with an emphasis on critical thinking and real-world application
- Supportive process for finding your practicum site and opportunities to include employment-based practicum hours
- Career center providing immediate and long-term professional support

The application for our inaugural cohort, starting in fall 2025, is now open. Connect with our admissions office today, and a team member will be in touch to answer your questions. Email **sswadmit@pitt.edu** or call 412-624-2832.

New Staff

Andrew Barrett is the school's new practicum education administrator.

Marcus Burkley is a new restorative practices coordinator with the Just Discipline Project.

Michele Gordon is the school's new director of career services and continuing education.

Sara McNemar is a research coordinator working with Nev Jones.

Emmett Mix is the new BASW and PhD program assistant.

Michael Scarpino is the new program and fiscal coordinator.

Amanda Varga is the new MSW program assistant.


Andrew Barrett


Michele Gordon


Amanda Varga

Faculty and Staff Retirements

Bobby Simmons, former director of the Van Kirk Career Center, retired in spring 2024 after 28 years with Pitt Social Work.

Cristina Newhill, long-time faculty member who completed several terms as doctoral program director, retired in spring 2024.

Faculty Promotions and Appointments

Quinton Cotton joined the faculty as an assistant professor.

Suzanne Pritzker joined the faculty as associate dean for academic affairs.

Leah Jacobs was promoted to associate professor.

Nev Jones was promoted to associate professor.


Quniton Cotton


Suzanne Pritzker


Leah Jacobs


Nev Jones

Faculty Awards, Honors, and Achievements


Shaun Eack

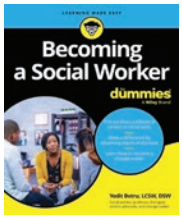

Ron Idoko


Toya Jones


Deborah Moon

The **CHURCH** (Congregations as Healers United to Restore Community Health) project, led by Assistant Professor Deborah Moon, David E. Epperson Endowed Chair and Professor John Wallace, and Assistant Professor and Director of Community Engagement Aliya Durham, received a 2024 Partnerships of Distinction award at the annual Community Engaged Scholarship Forum hosted by the Pitt Office of Engagement and Community Affairs. Durham also was honored as the 2024 Collaboration Champion at the event.





MSW Program Director and Assistant Professor **Yodit Betru** published a new book, "Becoming a Social Worker for Dummies."

Associate Dean for Research and Associate Professor **Jaime Booth** was named a 2024 fellow of the Society for Social Work and Research. Additionally, her article, "Examining Parental Monitoring, Neighborhood Peer Anti-social Behavior, and Neighborhood Social Cohesion and Control as a Pathway to Adolescent Substance Use," was selected as an editor's choice paper by the Journal of Child and Family Studies, indicating that it is a high-quality publication with likely interest among the journal's readership and beyond.

Kyaien Conner, Donald M. Henderson Chair and professor; associate dean for justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion; and director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, along with students from the School of Social Work, was hosted by Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro for National Association of Social Workers Legislative Education and Advocacy Day in March 2024. Conner also was chosen to participate in the 2024 Atlantic Coast Conference Academic Leaders Network.

Shaun Eack, professor and James J. and Noel W. Browne Chair, received the 2024 Connie Lieber Science to Practice Award at the 26th Annual Cognitive Remediation in Psychiatry Conference.

Associate Professor **James Huguley** was selected for the inaugural PittEI3 (Equitable, Inclusive, Innovation and Incubation) fellowship.

Ron Idoko, associate director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, founding director of the Racial Equity Consciousness Institute, and research assistant professor, was honored with the 2024 Creating a Just Community Award from the Pitt Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Idoko also received the Dr. Larry E. Davis Emerging Scholar Award at the 2024 Dr. Larry E. Davis Black Excellence in the Academy Award Dinner.

Associate Professor **Nev Jones** was chair of the 2024 International Society for Psychological and Social Approaches to Psychosis United States Chapter 23rd Annual Conference, New Beginnings: Reimagining Psychosis Services and Systems in the United States, held in Pittsburgh in November 2024.

BASW Program Director and Assistant Professor **Toya Jones** launched the "Healing Overflow with Dr. Toy" social work podcast. The podcast airs every first and third Thursday at noon. Jones also was named a 2024 Passion Meets the Road awardee from Vision Towards Peace.

Assistant Professor **Deborah Moon** is a guest editor for a special issue of the journal Youth, titled Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on Positive Mental Health of Youth and Emerging Adults.

Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates Academic Coordinator and Assistant Professor **Brooke Rawls** was named to the New Pittsburgh Courier's 2024 Fab 40 under 40 list.



Kyaien Conner, director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, and Associate Professor James Huguley joined social work students and social workers as Mayor Ed Gainey presented a proclamation naming March 2024 Uplifting Social Work Month in the city of Pittsburgh.

Staff Awards and Accomplishments

Payroll and Personnel Coordinator **Michael Jasek** earned his Pitt sustainability professional certificate and is on his way to becoming an institutional green ambassador.

Research Manager **Laurie Mejia** was honored for 40 years of service at the University of Pittsburgh.



Laurie Mejia

Student Awards and Accomplishments



Jenn Lee



Priya Gupta



Stravroula Xinos

Two doctoral students were named Joseph and Helen Eaton Scholarship winners: **Christina Babusci** and **Tess Schleitwiler**.

Thomas Barnes (BASW '24) and **Thomas Miller** (BASW '24) were named University scholars at the 2024 Senior Distinguished Awards Convocation. This prestigious title indicates that they graduated in the top 2% of their class based on GPA.

Priya Gupta (BASW '24) presented "From Resource Scarcity to Psychological Toll: Challenges Faced by Mental Health Crisis Workers," based on research conducted with Associate Professor Leah Jacobs, at the 2024 Atlantic Coast Conference Meeting of the Minds at the University of Notre Dame.

Doctoral student **Jenn (Hyunjin) Lee**, along with colleagues from Case Western Reserve University, received a top ten poster award and a $1,000 cash prize at 2023 Global Flourishing Conference (GFC): Advancing Science and Solutions for a Flourishing World. Lee also received a Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) Doctoral Student Travel Award for the 2024 Annual Conference. In addition, she received funding from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law's Center for Civil Rights and Racial Justice to further her exploration of oral health access challenges, expanding upon the work she began in her previous capstone project.

Stravroula Xinos (MSW '24) had her abstract, "The Intersections of Intimate Partner Violence, HIV, Trans and Queer Identities, and Substance Use," selected for three conferences in 2024: the 36th National Conference on Social Work and HIV/AIDS in Orlando, Florida; Continuum 2024, the 19th International Conference on HIV Treatment and Prevention Adherence, in Puerto Rico; and the National Ryan White Conference on HIV Care & Treatment in Washington, D.C.

Xinos and **Sydney Biondi** (MSW '24) had their proposal, "Liberatory Harm Reduction and Social Work: Beyond Substance Use," selected for the National Association of Social Workers Pennsylvania Chapter 2024 Conference.

Q&A with Henry Cantu, Director of Recruitment and Admissions

Henry Cantu has a long-standing career in admissions and recruitment. He joined the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work in August 2023 as its director of recruitment and admissions and hit the ground running with the help of his team. We asked him to share more about his background and how he ended up in Pittsburgh.

Q: You received your BASW from Texas Tech University. Did this influence your career path into admissions? If not, what inspired you to enter this field and how did your career journey lead you to Pitt Social Work?

A: My father was a driving force for this decision, [because] he was an educator and knew that a degree in social work would make me marketable. My senior year practicum focused on vocational rehabilitation, [and] I helped clients, often farm workers with injuries, improve their job readiness and resume-writing skills. This solidified that I wanted to work directly with people. I also worked in the admissions office as part of my college work-study program, which gave me insight into the behind-the-scenes admissions and recruitment work.



After graduating, I worked in customer service at a test publishing company before moving into admissions work, which allowed me to apply my social work skills in guiding students and families through the admissions process. I found this work especially fulfilling, particularly when supporting first-generation students. I was initially looking at getting an MSW but pursued a master's in higher education administration. From there, I stayed in higher education to pursue a career in enrollment management.

My career [has] centered on admissions and recruitment, primarily in Texas, but my love for the Northeast led me to the University of Connecticut School of Social Work in 2022, [and there] I reconnected with my social work roots. I was attracted to this position at Pitt Social Work because it allowed me to focus on just admissions and recruitment, which are my main passions. When I came for my interview and saw Pittsburgh, I fell in love with the place.

Q: How has the role of admissions and recruitment professionals changed since you first started, and what have you learned along the way?

A: While the core principles of admissions and recruitment—helping students understand the admissions process and navigate college—remain the same, the methods have evolved significantly. When I started, technology was minimal, and everything was paper based. I remember going to schools or events and having a huge rolling cart packed full of catalogs! Today, technology plays a crucial role, with virtual events and digital communications enhancing our ability to reach and connect with students. Despite these changes, the fundamental philosophy of supporting and educating students has stayed constant.

Q: What are some of the exciting opportunities on the horizon for the admissions and recruitment team?

A: The biggest thing on the horizon is the implementation and launch of the part-time online MSW program. This addition to our program speaks a lot to our willingness to offer options to our students. There's not just one way to be able to successfully deliver a program; it's all about options. I'm thrilled to be working with a dean who embraces online technology and am eager to manage the recruitment process for both in-person and online programs.

Q: What's your favorite thing about running the school's admissions and recruitment efforts?

A: I was very lucky to inherit an amazing team, Jessie Gismondi and Leah Mafrica. They have so much talent, initiative, enthusiasm, and knowledge and were instrumental in helping me get started. I'm a strong advocate for professional development, having benefited from mentors early in my career. Providing similar growth opportunities for my team is a priority.

Also, the support from everyone in the School of Social Work has been outstanding. The willingness of colleagues to assist and connect me with community resources has been crucial in enhancing our recruitment efforts. The collective talent and motivation here make it an exciting environment to drive our recruiting success.

Q: How do you envision connecting with alumni, and what role do they play in your vision for Pitt Social Work?

A: Early in my career, I recognized the crucial role alumni play in recruiting efforts. Their experiences and endorsements are incredibly impactful for prospective students and families. Alumni bring credibility, and I've seen firsthand when recruiting for programs where being an alumnus myself added significant value.

I'm grateful to the alums who have helped with open houses and orientation. After these events, students most enjoy being able to connect with alumni and hear how their degree from Pitt has influenced their career and made them a force in the social work profession. We're also going to start looking at on-the-road receptions, where we invite alumni who are in that area. At some point, I will find those alumni willing to share their stories. Their involvement will be essential in showcasing the real-world impact of a Pitt Social Work degree. Our current students and alums are our greatest recruiters, so I am always appreciative when alumni are enthused to be involved.

Q: What does life outside the office look like for you?

A: Since moving to Pittsburgh a year ago, my partner and I have been exploring the area. We love discovering the city's unique neighborhoods, from restaurants to shops. As a music enthusiast, I've enjoyed attending symphony performances and musical theater. Our dog, Charley, is a central part of our lives. We've had her for four years, and we couldn't imagine our life without her. We also travel a lot to explore the areas around Pittsburgh like Erie, New York, and Ohio.

CRSP Year in Review

The University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work's Center on Race and Social Problems (CRSP) had an impactful year collaborating with departments and organizations at Pitt, the broader community, and internationally to further its mission. From thought-provoking lectures to artistic engagements, CRSP sponsored a wide range of events fostering connection, dialogue, and belonging. Additionally, CRSP was invited to present at a variety of conferences around the world.

This year, CRSP Director Kyaien Conner received a prestigious Pitt Momentum Funds Teaming Grant for Creating Synergies and Collaborations to Advance Race-based Research at the University of Pittsburgh. This project engages key racial equity research leaders across Pitt and aims to amplify local race-related research through a collaborative repository. Conner also received a Fulbright-Hays award, which will allow her to direct a monthlong seminar project in Senegal in the summer of 2025.

The Racial Equity Consciousness Institute (RECI), founded by CRSP Associate Director Ron Idoko in 2021, has continued to thrive this year. Community partnerships and cohort learning opportunities grew significantly, and the RECI film "Illuminating the Vaccine for Racism" premiered in January 2024. In addition, Pitt's Schools of Social Work and Medicine were recently awarded a $5 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to evaluate RECI's impact on addressing systemic racism in health care.

CRSP also celebrated the achievements of its students who were awarded Year of Discourse and Dialogue grants:

- **Sommer Blair**, Parenting for Racial Equity: Assuring the Next Generation of Antiracists
- **Cruzilious Contreras-Amezcua** (MSW '24), Leading Social Work Students to LEAD: Legislative Education and Advocacy Day
- **Daniel Abusuampeh**, Space for Voice: Race and Social Problems Discourse

Abusuampeh, who also founded the African Tribe Bridge Institute, has been invited to present at various conferences to discuss his initiative, which aims to promote unity and address tribalism.



2023 RECI Facilitators Academy Cohort

Aliya Durham led the successful launch of the Community and Racial Equity Leadership Fellowship program, which provides graduate students with opportunities to learn while working in community-engaged programs. The fellowship is designed to prepare students who are traditionally underrepresented in social work and to help them fill the gaps in their undergraduate studies with experiences and skills to enter careers in macro practice settings.

The launch of new programming and partnerships also highlighted the year. The Race and Youth Development Research Group, led by James Huguley in partnership with Awaken Pittsburgh and the Clairton City School District, launched Mindful Connections for Parenting and School Success. This initiative provides support to caregivers in marginalized communities to ensure academic and emotional success for their children. The Just Discipline Project, also led by Huguley, has expanded significantly, now reaching 18 schools in Pittsburgh and serving more than 5,000 students. This program, supported by a U.S. Department of Education grant, works toward equitable disciplinary and academic outcomes.

CRSP is positioned for continued growth and community impact, reinforcing its mission to advance racial equity on local, national, and global levels.



SCHOOL RISES IN U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT GRADUATE PROGRAM RANKINGS

The University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work jumped nine spots to 12th in the 2024 U.S. News & World Report rankings of social work graduate programs. There are 319 programs ranked in the survey, which puts Pitt in the top 4% nationwide.



12th

RANKED SOCIAL WORK GRADUATE PROGRAM IN THE NATION

Faculty Grants

Professor and James J. and Noel W. Browne Chair **Shaun Eack** is a coinvestigator on a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) grant for his project, Accelerated Neuromodulation of Prefrontal Circuitry during Clozapine Treatment.

Eack and Pitt Associate Professor of Psychiatry Deepak Sarpal have been awarded $3.8 million by NIMH for their project, Neural Mechanisms of Anticholinergic Burden in Mid- to Late-life Schizophrenia Spectrum Illness.

Eack is a coinvestigator on a project being led by Pitt Associate Professor of Psychiatry Konasale Prasad that has been awarded more than $4 million in funding by NIMH. The project is titled Adolescent Brain Maturation and Psychopathology.

Stephanie Eckstrom, director of the regional MSW program at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, received a Pitt Year of Discourse and Dialogue grant for Racial Equity Consciousness Institute: Bradford Campus In-person Cohort.

Dean **Betsy Farmer** is the principal investigator on a grant funded by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (CDC Prime) for Project SEEKS: Social Work for Social and Emotional Learning. Farmer also is a coinvestigator, along with postdoctoral fellow **Daniel Lee**, on a University of Colorado Denver (NIMH Prime) grant, Navigation and Peer Support to Promote Access and Retention of Children in Mental Health Services.

Associate Professor **James Huguley** is on a team that received a Pitt Momentum Funds Scaling Grant for its project, Linking University-Community Initiatives to Promote a Child's Thriving Pipeline across Early Developmental Stages. Huguley also received grants from The Heinz Endowments and the University of Chicago for his Just Discipline Project and a grant from the National Science Foundation for Collaborative Research: Black Girls as AI Technology Creators: A Scalable Ecosystem to Support Racial Justice in AI Education.

Ron Idoko, associate director of the Center on Race and Social Problems (CRSP) and research assistant professor, is a coinvestigator on a National Institutes of Health grant for the project Network of the National Library of Medicine All of Us Program Center.

Associate Professor **Nev Jones** received funding from A-G Associates (SAMHSA prime) for Presentation and Systematic Review of the Literature on Mental Health Recovery. Jones also was awarded a $3.48 million NIMH grant, in collaboration with Joshua Breslau of the RAND Corporation, for A Service User-informed Study of Certified Community Behavioral Health Center Implementation and Impact in New York State.

Jones is a coinvestigator and Pitt site principal investigator on a new NIMH grant, Measuring What Matters: Patient-centered Outcome Measures of Goal-directed Care for People with Serious Mental Illness. The study involves leaders at RAND and the National Committee for Quality Assurance. Jones also is a coinvestigator on a $5 million NIMH grant awarded under NIMH's Early Psychosis Intervention Network.

CRSP and the Center for Research on Innovations in Services and Equity in Mental Health funded several pilot projects based in Pitt Social Work: Cultural Influences on Treatment Engagement in Serious Mental Illness: A Comparison of U.S. Korean Immigrants and Native Korean Citizens (research team includes Jones); Renew Your Mind: A Feasibility Study to Disseminate Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Techniques through Black Churches to Promote Positive Mental Health of African American Populations (research team includes Assistant Professor **Deborah Moon** and Professor and David E. Epperson Chair **John Wallace**); and Partnering with Black Mental Health Providers to Support Assessment and Evaluation of Practice (research team includes Assistant Professor **Aliya Durham**, Associate Professor and Associate Dean for Research **Jaime Booth**, and Assistant Professor and MSW Program Director **Yodit Betru**).

Announcing New Social Work Research Collaboratives for 2024-25

The University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work is excited to announce four new Social Work Research Collaboratives for the 2024-25 academic year. These collaboratives aim to advance social work practice and research in key areas by fostering community, building knowledge, and supporting innovative approaches within the field.

The Care Work Research Collaborative, convened by Research Associate Professor Mary Elizabeth Rauktis, addresses the critical concerns surrounding worker well-being within the care economy. Building on previous research, this collaborative will examine the impacts of care work on individual physical and mental health, focusing on a broad definition of caregivers that includes both paid professionals and kinship caregivers. By exploring the intersections of various professions and the unique challenges they face, the collaborative aims to generate creative ideas and research that ultimately will lead to better support and interventions for caregivers.

The Healthy Aging Research Collaborative, convened by Clinical Assistant Professor Elizabeth Mulvaney and others, is dedicated to advancing research and developing community partnerships to enhance the well-being of older adults. The collaborative's initiative, The Ties That Bind, emphasizes health equity, innovation, intergenerational connectivity, and the importance of social bonds as people age. This collaborative aims to make the greater Pittsburgh region the premier place to age in America by advocating for the voices and priorities of older adults. With an advisory group contributing to its success, the collaborative will serve as a launching pad for new research ideas and partnerships that address the social determinants of health for aging populations.

The Human Flourishing Research Collaborative, convened by Assistant Professor Deborah Moon, seeks to shift the focus of health and human services research from a deficit-oriented approach to one that emphasizes promotion. By concentrating on the factors that contribute to flourishing and positive mental health, this collaborative aims to reduce the stigma associated with seeking services and to develop research that supports asset building. Social workers are uniquely positioned to lead this effort, and this initiative seeks to inspire innovative research that promotes overall well-being.

The Public Social Work Research Collaborative, convened by Associate Professor Leah Jacobs, will bring people together with a shared interest in critically assessing social work's status in producing an essential public good, carving out a place in the field for public social work, and increasing access to social work knowledge and services. The collaborative aims to build community and knowledge through developing public social work; to reinvigorate interest in and identify pathways to public-sector social work; to support public-sector work, advocacy, and activism; and to facilitate Pitt Social Work's substantive impact on the field by providing a vector through which faculty can create greater awareness of and access to their work.

These four collaboratives represent a significant step forward in advancing social work research and practice. Each is poised to make a meaningful impact in their respective areas, enhancing the field's knowledge base and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of social work practice.




Leah Jacobs


Deborah Moon


Elizabeth Mulvaney


Mary Elizabeth Rauktis



Teller Lecture Addresses Intersection of Social Work and Climate Change

In March 2024, the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work hosted Regardt "Reggie" Ferreira, professor of social work and director of Tulane University's Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy, for the Sydney and Julia Teller Endowed Lecture on World Social Work Day.

"Debbie Moon and I decided that Global Social Work week should focus on global issues of environmental sustainability and the critical role of social workers in that space," says Pitt Social Work Research Associate Professor Mary Rauktis. "It is often not a space that social workers think to be involved in, yet we have the important skills to bring people together on these often-divisive issues. Reggie's work in the New Orleans epicenter of environmental disaster was not only in disaster response but in prevention."

Ferreira, a third-generation social worker, was introduced by Rauktis, who discussed the intersection of climate change and social work. "Social work is involved in many global spaces. Our responses usually come when there are disasters," she said, "and we are helping communities recover when they are impacted by climate change or disaster. When people are impacted by war, social work is in those spaces. However, social work needs to be there, at the table, before disasters happen."

Ferreira's lecture, "How to Advocate for Climate Justice," opened with a quote from a 2023 United Nations Development Programme report defining climate justice as "putting equity and human rights at the core of decision-making and action on climate change." He also noted that low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionally affected by climate change.

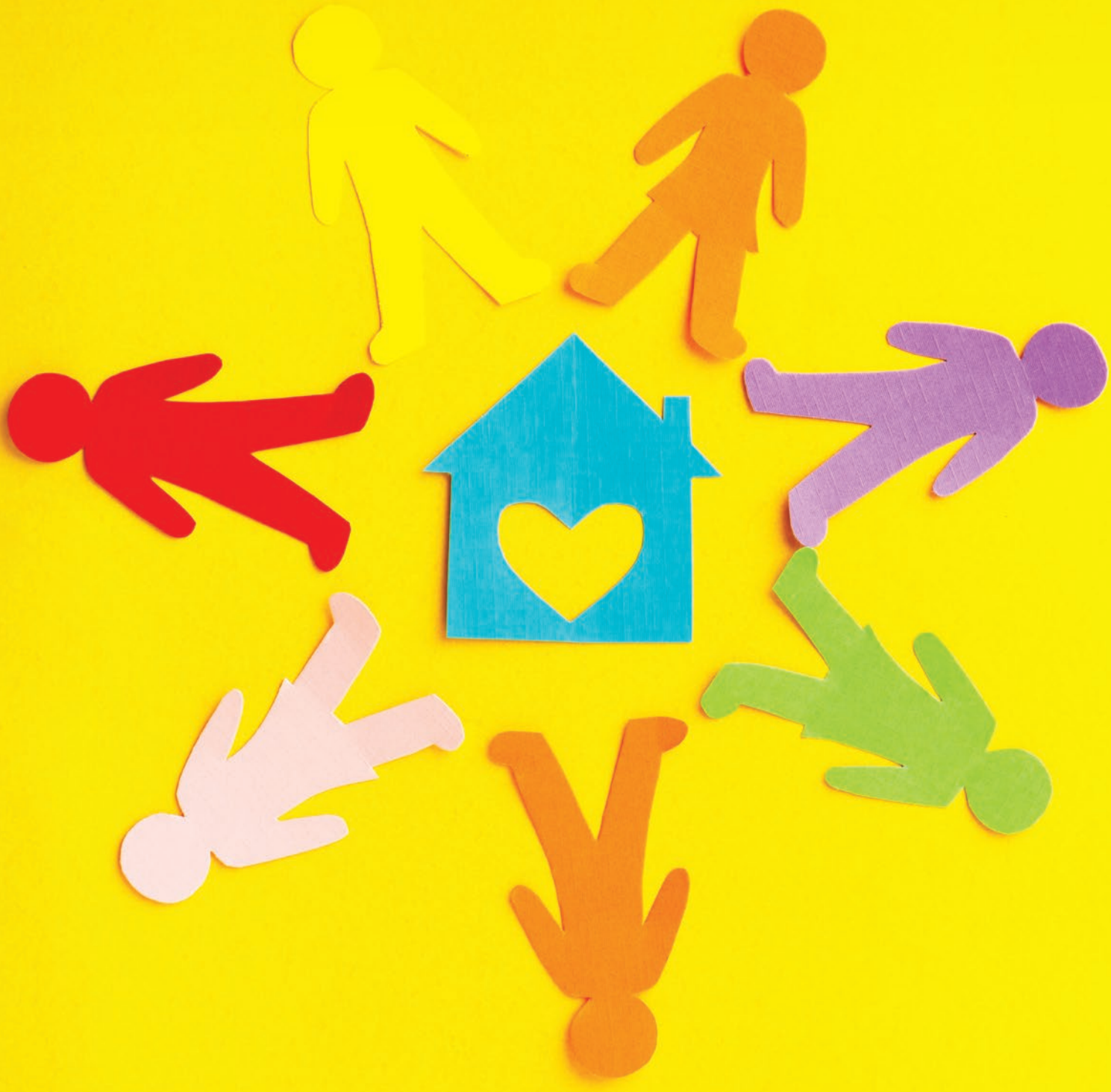
Ferreira shared best practices for engaging communities with a local-to-global lens that strives to eliminate barriers and ensures that frontline communities impacted by climate change can access needed resources. He spoke about how to make a difference from a social work perspective in the fight for climate justice to create a more equitable future for all.

"There is no other profession that is better situated than social work to bring about change," he said. "We understand communities. We are able to work with communities, households, and individuals. It's really a systems approach."

The question-and-answer period allowed attendees, both in person and online, to ask Ferreira about the intersection of social work and disaster, how to prevent excess stress on social workers in this field, and about his own work during disaster efforts.

He ended his remarks with a call to action for the audience to be part of the change by volunteering; being an advocate for those impacted; focusing on adaptation; reducing, reusing, and recycling; advocating for local, national, and international polices; and, finally, making self-care a priority.

Ferreira also is the program director of the Consortium for Equitable Disaster Resilience. His main research interest is at the intersection of disaster, climate change, resilience, and behavioral health, and he has conducted work in Europe, Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and South Asia. ■



Pitt Social Work Celebrates
30 Years of Leadership and Collaboration
in Child Welfare

Stephanie Svolos has worked in the child welfare field for 10 years, so she knows well its ups, downs, and everything in between.

In 2020, she decided it was time to pursue an advanced degree that could give her a better understanding of the ethics around social work and more opportunities to become a leader in the field.

"One of the things I learned in grad school was people's right to self-determination and putting that into practice. You have to accept each person and each family where [they are] and work with them from there," says Svolos, a caseworker for child protective services in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

When Svolos earned her master's degree at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work in 2022, she also became one of 1,746 graduates to do so thanks to the support of the pioneering and now three-decades-old Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL) program. In collaboration with 13 schools of social work in Pennsylvania, including Pitt, CWEL provides financial backing to current public child welfare employees who decide to pursue a master's degree in social work. The program covers associated costs such as travel to classes and books and supplies. Salary reimbursement is provided to students who receive an educational leave from their county child welfare employment to attend school full time. This investment is made in return for continued service at the public child welfare agency equal to the time engaged in graduate study.

Launched formally at Pitt in 1995, CWEL celebrates 30 years of trailblazing initiatives that have improved child welfare training and education for students and professionals across the commonwealth. Former CWEL participants have assumed leadership roles as child welfare agency administrators and supervisors; led changes in practice; engaged in teaching the next generation of child welfare practitioners at universities and training centers; and overseen special projects such as family engagement, trauma-informed care, and services for older youths.

The innovative program is a cooperative effort among the federal Administration for Children and Families, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, and Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators. Its mission is to strengthen public child welfare services in the commonwealth by providing educational opportunities at the graduate level for public child welfare personnel.

"We're professionalizing child welfare, upgrading services, [and] training the people who go every single day into homes of families across Pennsylvania and every single county to protect children, to facilitate family decision making, and to ensure that every kid in Pennsylvania is properly cared for and no child is in danger," says Edward Sites (MSW '64), founder and former principal investigator of the Child Welfare Education and Research Programs at Pitt Social Work.

Participating in CWEL provides students who have been working in the child welfare field with the opportunity


Edward Sites

to obtain a broader perspective of how best to engage and intervene with families who are met with the interrelated challenges of poverty, systemic oppression, unequal access to resources, and the pressures of parenting under difficult circumstances. It exposes students to broader evidence-based practices and how they can be implemented within the context of the communities in which children and families live, says Helen Cahalane (MSW '79, PhD '96), who has led the child welfare programs as principal investigator for the past 20 years.

In many instances, says Cahalane, access to resources and culturally relevant community support can alleviate the need for child protective services, and this philosophy of service and outreach is foundational to CWEL's mission of enhancing the quality of parent-child relationships.

Keep in mind, Cahalane adds, that public child welfare workers operate as first responders: "We're preparing individuals to work with cases of potential child abuse and child neglect,

and we're supporting families, making sure that we're doing everything we can do to keep children in their local communities and to promote their healthy growth and development."

Along with these efforts, Cahalane says, the Child Welfare Education and Research Programs provide support, training, and technical assistance to local public child welfare agencies in each jurisdiction of Pennsylvania through the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center. This combination of individual and organizational enhancement is contributing to building and sustaining a strong workforce, strong organizations, and a strong child welfare system.



Helen Cahalane

The beginnings

Child welfare has been central to Pitt Social Work since it was founded more than 100 years ago. The first child- and family-focused courses were offered in 1917, shortly after the founding of the U.S. Children's Bureau, the nation's first federal agency dedicated to addressing child labor, orphanages, and other child and family issues. In 1938, Pitt Social Work introduced a master's-level curriculum focused on child safety and well-being. Years later, a children and youth concentration was established and became a curriculum model adopted by other schools of social work across the nation. The 1970s ushered in the first in a series of uninterrupted state, federal, and foundation child welfare training grants that continue to the present.

The seeds of the current professional education programs began with amendments to the Social Security Act that included funding for the training of child welfare workers. Nearly 33 years ago, a pilot program in collaboration with Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, was the catalyst for the development of a longer-term training model to address child welfare workforce issues. That model became a reality in 1995 with the creation of CWEL. Its success laid the foundation for two additional professional development programs that are helping to support and enhance the child welfare workforce in Pennsylvania.

The first is Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB), which began in 2001. It provides financial and career assistance to undergraduate social work majors preparing to enter public child welfare after graduation.

The second is the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, which came under Pitt's leadership in 2001. It is based in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and provides training, technical assistance, and organizational enhancement to administrators, supervisors, and caseworkers across the state's 67 county child welfare agencies.

The longevity of the three programs has strengthened their contributions to the well-being of children and families in Pennsylvania. CWEL and CWEB have together enabled more than 3,000 students across 18 schools of social work to have a positive impact on communities, while the Child Welfare Resource Center has enabled another 3,500 child welfare professionals from county agencies to make constructive differences.

Today, the work of these child welfare education programs has become woven into the fabric of Pennsylvania's child welfare system. States across the nation have since implemented similar programs, with Pitt's being the second largest and one of the oldest.

Pitt's statewide continuum of child welfare education, training, and organizational improvement is known nationwide for its comprehensive approach to workforce development, according to multiple federal child welfare reviews that assess how workers are caring for families, children, and communities.

From county to county

Pennsylvania is one of the few states in the country where child welfare is administered at the county level; in most other states, child welfare programs are state led, says Mike Byers, director of the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center. Byers is a proud early participant of the CWEL program who began his career nearly 28 years ago and remains committed to public child welfare.

"That means," says Byers, "that there are 67 organizations that may be practicing a little bit differently, may be operationalizing their approach differently based on the needs of their community. One of the services we provide is acknowledging that county-level difference."

This is important, Byers adds, because each county is unique in its population composition, infrastructure, community resources, social service availability, child welfare workforce size, and integration among service providers.

Through the Child Welfare Resource Center, Pitt has a statewide presence by leading practice initiatives, promoting organizational change, training the workforce, and assisting in the implementation of state and federal child welfare policy. Though it has been in operation under Pitt for nearly 25 years, the center continues to innovate to offer technical services to help county child welfare agencies retain workers as staff shortages grow more critical.

"We are launching an assessment tool this fall," Byers says, "that is evidence informed and gets at what may be causing some of the staffing challenges that a county is experiencing, from job satisfaction to burnout or supervision issues."

All these matters, he adds, "are critical to better understanding what's happening, and then we partner with our technical assistance team to support the county in implementing change as a result of those findings."

Despite staffing challenges, Byers and others note that the child welfare system has made great strides in other

areas, including how it engages with families in addressing difficult issues, such as substance abuse, various forms of addiction, behavioral health concerns, parental incarceration, and the consequences of child neglect and abuse.

"When I first started as a case worker in Dauphin County in 1999, the emphasis on families was more of one that [caseworkers] were the experts, and we could tell families how to best serve them," says Sarina Bishop, assistant director of the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center and a former CWEL participant who has moved into a position of leadership.

Across the industry, Bishop and other practitioners are aware that the perspective has shifted to using family strengths to make collaborative decisions for achieving goals.

They observe, too, that another essential component of child welfare system reform efforts is collaborating with individuals with lived experience as subject matter experts in developing policy recommendations and strategic plans. The professional staff of the Child Welfare Resource Center includes parents and youths who have personal experience with the child welfare system.



The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania

Bigger and better

As these programs approach 30 years of operation, its participants are needed more than ever because Pennsylvania, like many states, is facing a critical shortage of social services providers. The state will need 12,690 more social services providers, including social workers, by 2030, according to a 2023 report from Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education.

The Child Welfare Resource Center's most recent analysis of child welfare workforce data shows that the turnover rates for public-sector caseworkers improved over the last fiscal year. The median turnover rate decreased to 21% in state fiscal year 2022-23 compared to 24% in 2021-22. Turnover rates vary greatly across counties, with the most current rates ranging from 0% to 55%. This marks the smallest range in turnover rates for several years. While decreases in turnover are a positive shift toward a more stable workforce, data indicate that there is a need for more workers. The number of child welfare professionals remains 400-500 people fewer than in prior years. In addition, the number of caseworkers hired in state fiscal year 2022-23 marks the continuation of a downward trend over the past several years.

Despite these challenges, Pitt's child welfare programs have continued to evolve and adapt to meet the needs of Pennsylvania's children and families. Since the inception of these programs, the overarching goal has been to develop the leaders needed to maintain high-quality child welfare services through meaningful and close partnerships with the state.

"Our graduates and our trainees have assumed leadership roles in practice initiatives throughout the state and actively contribute to shaping the future of child welfare services on the local, state, and national level," Cahalane says. "They are providing direct service, serving as managers and supervisors, mentoring junior colleagues, contributing to training curricula, conducting quality improvement programs, leading race equity initiatives, participating in child fatality/near fatality reviews, and working as child welfare trainers and consultants."



Reflections from Pitt graduates and current students

Kiesha Kamdar (BASW '21, MSW '24), who completed Pitt's CWEB program in 2021 and CWEL in summer 2024, is a case worker for the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF). She chose to pursue a career in child welfare because of her own experiences in the foster care system.

"I just wanted to help kids understand that they do not have to identify as what caused them to be involved with the system and that there was better for them out there," she says.

CWEB and CWEL educated her on the need to give people who are enduring challenges, particularly substance abuse, more grace as they try to navigate improving their lives.

Tyler Olzak, an undergraduate in his final year of the BASW program, says that his own experience interning with CYF has been profound.

"There's a lot of trauma involved in it, and there's a lot of heavy work that we deal with, but it's definitely rewarding," he says.

In addition to robust academic preparation, the CWEB program provided Olzak with tuition and fellowship support in exchange for service within a public child welfare agency following graduation. Interns like Olzak manage their own cases and work one on one with families to build experience as practitioners.

"Child welfare is definitely one of the most rewarding social work fields. Helping a family get where they know that they can be and where you know that they really can be is something that I've really enjoyed," says Olzak.

Cahalane sees the recruitment of more child welfare professionals like Kamdar and Olzak as one of the top priorities of the Child Welfare Education and Research Programs.

"These are critical positions that can make a significant difference in a child's life and a family's life," she says.

As those involved in the child welfare system, including educators and practitioners, think about long-term goals, says Cahalane, they must consider how to continue to provide high levels of support and professional development for public child welfare professionals and how to prepare them to meet the demands of an ever-changing sociopolitical landscape.

"Professionals working in child welfare must be equipped to focus on the child, the family, and the community context," she says. "They must be attuned and ready to confront long-standing issues of racial inequity, systemic racism, and oppression that influence societal responses to child protection and family support."

Cahalane maintains that a greater focus on and funding for prevention services has begun to open opportunities for the child welfare system to move toward early intervention and community-based solutions for alleviating many of the stressors associated with child maltreatment.

"The health and well-being of the child welfare workforce remains central to this shift," she says. "After all, even an army of dedicated social workers can't provide high-quality services without growth opportunities, highly functioning organizations, and the structural supports necessary to engage in complex and challenging work involving the lives of children and their families."

It's a concept that applies to the broader field, too.

As a graduate student, Michael Komorowski (MSW '20) described himself as a nontraditional student because there was a 16-year gap between earning his bachelor's degree in psychology and enrolling in CWEL at Pitt.

When he was applying, he worried that his less-than-stellar undergraduate grade point average would hurt his chances of being accepted into the program. He addressed that in his essay when he applied, and he was admitted on provisional status, says Komorowski, who now works as a best practice specialist in CYF.

He takes pride in the fact that he earned a 4.0 GPA in every term in CWEL and received the Dean's Scholar Award when he graduated in 2020.

"I reflect on that experience and take the same approach. When you're in social work, we cannot change the past, but we can learn from our mistakes and work forward toward the future," he says.

MOVING FORWARD

Pitt's School of Social Work salutes its program participants and its partners in the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families with sincere admiration. Their investment, risks, energy, vision, and contributions to the child welfare system are more responsible than anything else for the continued success of the CWEB and CWEL programs and the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center. A note of gratitude goes to each and every Child Welfare Education and Research Programs team member who makes countless contributions to our program operations throughout each year.





Challenges and Opportunities

While there are many challenges within the public child welfare system, there also is tremendous opportunity for growth and innovation. In the past year, Pitt's professional education programs welcomed eight new school partners that provide expanded opportunities for child welfare studies across the state. Online and hybrid learning opportunities have created options for education beyond traditional campus settings. The School of Social Work is building a firmer pathway from community college to higher education at a time when school enrollment has declined across the nation. Opportunities abound for individuals who are looking for ways to give back to their local communities and reenergize public services such as child welfare. Efforts continue to expand the voices of youths and families to inform decision making and direction by hiring individuals with lived experience in positions of leadership. The school has intensified its focus on race equity and disproportional representation within the child welfare system through a concerted emphasis on strengthening its internal foundation; making concrete enhancements to services; and integrating race equity principles into its child welfare policies, procedures, and daily activities.

In 2026, Pennsylvania will undergo the fourth round of the federal Child and Family Services Reviews. This requires a statewide assessment; on-site reviews by a team of federal, state, and local child welfare experts; and the development of a comprehensive plan to address the needs of the state in ensuring that Pennsylvania's most vulnerable children and families receive the services they need to thrive.

Future directions:

- Implementation of a statewide universal assessment protocol that will more precisely identify the strengths and needs of children, families, and caregivers so that the most appropriate services and interventions can be provided to address needs
- Continued emphasis upon community-based supports and services to address poverty, concrete needs such as food and affordable housing, behavioral health and substance abuse treatment, education, and family caregiving
- Focus on prevention/early intervention to avoid deeper child welfare system involvement
- Incorporation of a trauma-informed approach to care that avoids judgment and recognizes that individuals are more than their experiences
- Universal services for pregnancy/parenting, particularly when high-risk factors are identified, that are provided to all new parents and at a level of intensity that meets individual needs



Positive rewards of challenging work:

- Supporting someone in taking the step toward substance abuse treatment and then seeing them achieve sobriety and be fully present with their children
- Helping a parent to maintain contact with their children while they are incarcerated and playing a role in keeping the connection between a parent and child(ren)
- Providing a judgment-free zone for a parent who has abused or neglected their child and supporting them in changing that narrative
- Finding a "forever home" for a youth who has been in foster care
- Witnessing a former foster youth graduate from college after years of trauma and a disrupted education
- Supporting a child welfare caseworker through graduate school and seeing them move on to a leadership position in their agency
- Watching the career progression of a person who began child welfare work as an undergraduate student and is now supervising and mentoring other workers
- Mentoring a former child welfare student who is now teaching the same course that you taught to them many years ago
- Supporting a grandparent who has assumed caretaking of their grandchildren under difficult circumstances
- Watching a former child welfare client lead other parents in advocating for themselves and speaking their truth

The Power of Practicum

Bridging Theory and Practice

Practicum placements are a signature pedagogy of social work education, offering students invaluable hands-on experience that integrates classroom theory with real-world practice. A strong practicum team is an essential part of creating meaningful and impactful experiences in the program and in placements. University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Director of Practicum Education Tonya Slawinski and all five of her team members—Melvin Cherry, John Dalessandro, Amy DeGurian, Alicia Melnick, and Deborah Robinson—are graduates of the school's MSW program. Though they chose different paths after graduating, they ultimately found their way back to Pitt's practicum team, advocating for students and helping them to discover their passions.

The importance of practicum placements is universally acknowledged by the team. As Robinson emphasizes, "Practicums are everything. It's one thing to get an A on a test, but being a social worker is a creative process, and to be a good one, you need to be a creative problem solver."

Melnick adds, "Our practicums are more than internships. We expect students to build practice skills, much like clinical training in nursing."

As they navigate the challenges and rewards of working with diverse populations, students build confidence, develop professional relationships, and refine their career goals—all under the guidance of a trained supervisor. DeGurian explains, "The way we manage our curriculum and marry that with the practicum experience is crucial—we want students to read it on Monday, experience it on Tuesday, and talk about it on Thursday."

Practicums also help students fully grasp and grapple with the barriers clients face, such as transportation, childcare, or employment issues, which strengthens their ability to become effective social workers. While students may learn about these challenges in class, it's not until they hear clients' stories firsthand that their understanding deepens. Cherry notes that learning to "reframe language in the field can be the difference [between] a client wanting to engage with the student/professional [and] not." The practicum is where students realize their value as social workers and find their voice, especially as they move into more advanced placements.

Practicum experience is not only about building technical skills but also about personal transformation, and DeGurian says that it is rewarding to see students grow during their placements: "Many students enter the program with narrow career goals, but practicums broaden their understanding of what they can do with their social work degree."

Watching students expand their horizons and develop their professional identities is one of the most fulfilling aspects of the work for the practicum team. For Dalessandro, the practicum experience provides a safe environment where students can test their abilities, gain confidence, and confront real-world challenges. "An MSW will take you as far as you want to go," he says, underscoring the versatility of the degree.

Together, the members of the practicum team demonstrate that these placements are not just an academic requirement but rather part of a transformative experience that shapes students into competent, compassionate professionals ready to make a real difference in their communities. Their own practicum experiences are evidence of that.

The Pathway Back to Pitt

Tonya Slawinski (MSW '86, PhD '03)
Director of Practicum Education

"I started my MSW in Florida but finished it at Pitt Social Work. I specialized in direct practice, concentrating in mental health. My first placement was with a community mental health center and the second was with UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital, where I worked for many years.

"After the program, I never actually left Pitt. I was the MSW coordinator for [the University of Pittsburgh at] Johnstown, returned to get my PhD, and opened a crisis management firm where I hosted students. I continued in a variety of roles as an adjunct or part-time faculty member, but in 2021, I returned full time as the director of practicum education.

"I understand the strong pull to return to Pitt and [to] give back by sharing the lessons we gained from our own placements and passing that knowledge on to students. The practicum team is strong because they know the school; it's integrated into them—the goals, the missions, the values."

John Dalessandro (MSW '90)
Practicum Assistant Professor

"I attended Penn[sylvania] State [University] for its BSW program and learned how social work looks at the entirety of the person to find the best path forward. After undergrad, I worked in a hospital as a medical social worker for two years before returning to school. I specialized in administration, management, and policy planning at Pitt Social Work. It was a unique program because there were placements in



Practicum team (left to right): Tonya Slawinski, Deborah Robinson, John Dalessandro, Melvin Cherry, Alicia Melnick, and Amy DeGurian

government offices, electric companies, banks—places you wouldn't normally think a social worker would be. I was placed with the federal employee assistance program and gained a valuable skill set, but ultimately I had a passion for health care. After graduation, I was hired immediately at St. Clair Hospital as a medical social worker, where I worked in the open-heart surgery unit, emergency room, orthopaedic unit, cancer floor, and more. I was also put in charge of their employee assistance program, which would not have happened without my practicum placement.

"After 12 years at St. Clair Hospital, I returned to Pitt as director of the Pitt-Johnstown MSW program, where I recruited students and helped [to] shape the early phases of the program. I transitioned to director of practicum education in 2006, which allowed me to focus on what I love most: working directly with students. After the pandemic occurred, I returned to the faculty and continued to work closely with students.

"I returned to Pitt for the student energy and the appreciation shown by agency partners. Witnessing students succeed in their internships was tangible evidence and continues to reaffirm my belief in the power of social work. When you support the practicum of students, you're making a small impact on all of the people those students are going to help in the future. It's the gift that keeps on giving."

> "The practicum team is strong because they know the school; it's integrated into them—the goals, the missions, the values."
>
> Tonya Slawinski

Deborah Robinson (MSW '89)
Practicum Assistant Professor

"My undergraduate degree is from Seton Hill [University] in painting. Initially, I pursued an MSW because I was passionate about challenging societal norms through artistic expression and connecting with those in need.

"At the time, Pitt was set up as clusters, so I was in the poverty and associated problems cluster and concentrated in community organizing. My first practicum was at East Side Alliance in [Pittsburgh's] Bloomfield [neighborhood]. I created a resource book for older residents in four different neighborhoods. My second practicum was called the Mayor's Commission on Families, which was based half in downtown and half in Northview Heights. Both of my practicum experiences were wonderful and helped me get to know the city. I ended up working on the mayor's commission as a consultant after graduation, which opened an opportunity to work at Alma Illery Medical Center. I was a social worker there for two decades.

"During my career, I stayed connected to Pitt as a practicum instructor and an adjunct professor for a bachelor's-level class. Returning to the practicum office as a faculty member felt like a full-circle moment. It allowed me to teach and continue my commitment to social work."

Amy DeGurian (MSW '94)
Practicum Assistant Professor

"Having family members who pursued social work and having worked after undergrad at The Guidance Center in Bradford, Pennsylvania, I felt the path to an MSW was clear. I concentrated in Direct Practice and specialized in gerontology, an area where I felt I could make a real impact.

"My first practicum was under the mentorship of Tracy Soska, who played a pivotal role in my career and shaped my understanding of the field. I had a fantastic generalist placement working in supportive housing at TCV Community Services. This experience gave me a solid foundation in building rapport and prepared me for more challenging environments.

"For my second practicum, I interned at the VA in Aspinwall in the long-term care unit. I found myself trying to fix everything, but my practicum advisor helped me see that my role wasn't to solve all the problems, but to improve someone's immediate situation with support and resources. That shift in perspective changed my approach to social work entirely. This experience prepared me for my first job at a nursing home, where I worked for five years after graduation.

"In addition to hospital social work positions and hospice services, I taught at the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) and ran a consulting business, helping organizations address gaps in their services. After 15 years in the field, I returned to Pitt as an adjunct, teaching grief and loss, while also serving as the Hartford coordinator. In 2012, I joined the practicum office. I was drawn to the opportunity at Pitt because I've always valued variety in my work, and the practicum office allows me to have a day that never looks the same. There's a frequent misconception that the practicum faculty just find internships but, in reality, our department offers a wide range of opportunities and services including advising, teaching and community engagement."



Practicum assistant professor Melvin Cherry chats with students at orientation.

Alicia Melnick (MSW '09)
Practicum Assistant Professor

"After earning an undergraduate degree in psychology from Mount Union College in Ohio, with minors in sociology and theatre, I worked in a residential treatment facility for adolescents with severe mental health issues. While exploring graduate programs, social work appealed to me because I wanted to make a larger impact. As a first-generation college student, I had little understanding of what a master's program entailed, but I knew I wanted to work closely with people.

"I was fortunate to be accepted into the Hartford Fellowship as part of its second cohort and chose to specialize in geriatric mental health. My first practicum was at the Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging, where I worked on nursing home transitions, helping individuals return home and find housing. I continued working with the agency during the summer.

"In my second year, I did a dual placement at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic and Benedum Geriatric's (now called UPMC Senior Care) in-home program for older adults. These experiences were incredibly rewarding, and my connections there helped me secure a job after the program at Western Psych, where I worked for five years on the geriatric mental health floor.

"After five years, I transitioned to a management role at UPMC, overseeing social work within the department of care management. The role came with significant responsibility, including 24-hour accountability, which became challenging as I started my family. Although I loved the work, I realized I needed more consistent hours. I had always enjoyed mentorship, especially as a practicum instructor, and when a position opened in the practicum office, I applied. Joining the practicum team six years ago was a breath of fresh air and a major career shift for me."

Melvin Cherry (MSW '06)
Practicum Assistant Professor

"After earning a math degree from Saint Vincent College, I decided to pursue an MSW because I wanted to help people and make an impact in my community. I concentrated in Home and School Visitor. For my first practicum, I worked with Family Links in its school-based prevention department, and for my second, I was placed at Langley High School, later transferring to Oliver High School. I had great placements during my time at Pitt. I still have good relationships with both of my practicum instructors and the Director of Admissions at the time was also helpful while I was in the program and after.

"I ended up working at Family Links for two years after graduation before returning to Pitt as an academic retention specialist in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, working with students on academic probation. My social work background gave me a valuable lens to support students. I stayed in that role for six years before joining the practicum team, where I've now been for 10 years. What attracted me to this role was my passion for working with students and providing mentorship. I love the collegiate environment and wanted to return to a space where I could have a positive impact on students' growth."



Strength in Alumni

The alumni network at Pitt Social Work is vast, with each member bringing their own passion, history, and goals to the table. Together, this community has made and will continue to make a lasting impact. As alumni, we encourage you to stay connected and get involved with the place where it all began.

There are many ways alumni can get involved with practicum efforts:

- Become a practicum advisor.
- Partner as an agency.
- Participate in panel discussions for student learning.
- Join the practicum advisory board.
- Send job postings.
- Make a gift to the practicum fund to help with paid placements and other associated costs.

Please connect directly with Slawinski at **tslawin@pitt.edu** to learn more about getting involved.

Looking to make a lasting impact on a student's life? Scan the QR code to donate to the practicum fund. Your support empowers our students to continue making a difference in the areas they are most passionate about. ■

> "When you support the practicum of students, you're making a small impact on all of the people those students are going to help in the future. It's the gift that keeps on giving."
>
> John Dalessandro



Pictured from left to right are Mary Ohmer, Abdulkadir Chirambo, Abby Bonilla, and Laura Farra Myers.

COSA Bridges Academic Learning With Real-World Community Engagement

A cornerstone of the Community, Organization, and Social Action (COSA) concentration in the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Master of Social Work program is providing students with the tools and experiences they need to bridge academic learning with real-world community engagement. In addition to their practicum placements, students in the Community Organizing and Planning class (a mandatory core course) and the Community Planning and Development class (a core elective) participate in projects that demonstrate the program's commitment to addressing pressing social issues through collaborative, community-facing work.

Previously, these projects were directed by faculty, with entire classes working on a single professor-developed initiative. In 2017, Associate Professor and COSA Chair Mary Ohmer (MSW '86, PhD '04) revamped the model, allowing organizations to propose their own projects. These organizations might have had prior interactions with students (through practicum placements, for example) but had not previously engaged in collaborative projects like this. Students select which projects to pursue based on their interests, fostering student autonomy and allowing the school to engage multiple organizations each term. Through their involvement with community organizations, students gain invaluable skills in project management, fundraising, and strategic thinking, all while addressing pressing community needs. The hands-on experience allows students to connect their academic learning with real-world applications, reinforcing their commitment to social work and community engagement. For the organizations, this partnership alleviates workload and enhances their capacity to serve. The fresh perspectives and innovative ideas brought by students lead to tangible improvements, such as increased funding and enhanced outreach strategies. As a result, both students and organizations grow stronger together, creating a cycle of support that empowers communities and cultivates the next generation of leaders in social action.

This dynamic collaboration enriches the students' educational experience and strengthens the fabric of the communities they aim to uplift.

H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow and Mwanakuche Community Farm are two local organizations that jumped on the opportunity to collaborate with students.

H.O.P.E for Tomorrow is a Pittsburgh-based non-profit founded by Keysha Gomez to address the need for youth programming in the area. Starting in her living room in 2010 with just six kids, Gomez aimed to provide safe, supportive spaces for youths to learn and grow. Today, the organization provides year-round programming, including life skills and academic enrichment classes, for students from grade three through their second year of postsecondary education. The organization also has a robust parent program that offers


Seongbo Son

workshops on topics such as financial literacy and wellness.

Gomez's project proposal goal was to raise funds for Kulture Dance Academy's end-of-year recital, which is a branch of H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow. Offering dance classes like ballet, jazz, modern, hip-hop, and tap, Kulture Dance Academy is an organization that provides students with expert training. Because of this level of training, it can be challenging for families to afford classes and participate in the end-of-year recital. In the spring of 2024, four students chose this project, including Seongbo Son (MSW '24). The project, which exposed students to stakeholder meetings, fundraising and outreach, volunteer recruitment, and event promotion, resulted in more than $15,000 raised and led to improvements in fundraising strategies for future years.

Son chose H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow and the Kulture Dance Academy because of Gomez's commitment to improving the lives of vulnerable populations, particularly underprivileged youths. Son emphasizes that this project was pivotal for his growth as a student and a professional, stating that "it reinforced my commitment to working in community-based social work and provided me with practical insights into effective project management and community engagement." Now a PhD student at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, Son hopes to further investigate and develop community-based models and solutions and calls the knowledge and skills he gained from the COSA program "instrumental in achieving these goals and making a meaningful impact in the field of social work."

This year, H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow plans to work with a new cohort of students to focus on organizational capacity, building practices and policies that aid in the longevity and strength of the organization.

Supporting grassroots organizations not only eases staff members' workloads but also directly impacts the communities being served. Giving organization leaders and students the autonomy to shape the project opens the door to matching skill with need. Laura Farra Myers (MSW '24) and Abby Bonilla (MSW '24) appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the city around them through their involvement with Mwanakuche Farm, located in Pittsburgh's Perry South neighborhood and Mercer County, Pennsylvania. Both saw an opportunity to support a smaller organization and expand on their current strengths and future goals.

Mwanakuche Farm is a volunteer-run, Somali Bantu-led and -serving organization that provides more than fresh produce to the community. Executive Director Abdulkadir Chirambo says that "healing is the biggest part of our life." His goal is to provide his community with the tools and resources to thrive emotionally, mentally, and physically.

"They do a great job of finding funding for the work they do," Myers says. "It wasn't immediately clear just how good they were at this." Because of this already-strong foundation, Myers and Bonilla organized grant data and enhanced stories that could be told to funders, furthering Chirambo's mission to expand the opportunities to aid his community in the process of healing.

Because the two farms are in separate counties, Bonilla and Myers had to learn about their different funding streams. They reached out to foundations in Mercer County to build relationships and make funding partners aware of the farm while strengthening the work already started in Allegheny County. As someone not from the Pittsburgh area, Abby mentioned having to adapt and learn to be "comfortable with the uncomfortable to get the resources you need, an important notion of being a social worker."

The COSA program's emphasis on strategic thinking and community impact resonated with Myers and her vision for helping communities, families, and organizations. She had experience with grant writing, so this project was a good fit for her and allowed her to further expand this skill set. For Bonilla, the project pushed her to refine her client-led, strength-based approach and develop her networking and cold-calling skills. A joint MSW/MBA student, Bonilla chose the COSA concentration because of a desire to integrate her nonprofit background with a future in business, carving a pathway to strategic resource management. The COSA program's emphasis on real-world application has been instrumental in preparing her for a transition into the corporate realm after graduation.

Small but mighty, the COSA program at Pitt Social Work is one deeply committed to developing agents of change. Outside their class and practicum responsibilities, students show a commitment to these organizations, which is a testament to the impact they will continue to make. ■

What aspect of the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work do you still carry with you today?



MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Michael Dubinski (MSW '21)

Guardian Ad Litem Attorney, Legal Aid Society at Milwaukee County Children's Court Office

"Pitt Social Work led me to where I am today by giving me the mindset, training, and skills to see a vision for my career working at the intersection of law and social work."



SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

Michael Eichler (MSW '86)

Playwright

"I've led a career in training and educating community organizers. Later in life, I began to write plays and now fully focus on playwriting. My plays always include a theme based on a community organizing experience. Pitt Social Work was instrumental in my career and [gave me] a powerful degree that can be applied in a variety of ways. Never pigeonhole yourself!"



HOUSTON, TEXAS

Serwaa Omowale (MSW '08, PhD '21)

Assistant Professor, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston School of Public Health

"Pitt Social Work is known for its community engagement and community-based work. My PhD advisor and dissertation chair was John Wallace, who is very involved in this field. I was able to see how the PhD program does community engagement, which prepared me to do community-based intervention work. I still use my MSW skill set when I interact with people and in my research."

BY THE NUMBERS



6,000+
ALUMNI RESIDE IN PENNSYLVANIA

PITTSBURGH HAS MORE THAN
4,500
ALUMNI

66
INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI



BANDUNG, WEST JAVA, INDONESIA

Yanti Kusumawardhani (MSW '05)

Consultant, Save the Children Indonesia, and Indonesia Representative on Children Rights, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children

"I am forever grateful for and proud of my MSW at [the] School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh. It has shaped my career in my country, Indonesia; ASEAN region; and a larger global context in areas that I [am] deeply connected to. The more you learn, the more you will grow, and as we learn with pleasure, we never forget!"

CHEVERLY, MARYLAND

Jasmine Wilson-Bryant (MSW '11)

Senior Social Worker Geriatrics, Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, D.C.

"Pitt gave me a stronger foundation in understanding the different avenues of geriatric social work, particularly within the federal government. Through diverse hands-on experiences and fellowships, I learned how to address the unique needs of older adults while navigating the policies and systems that support them. This training continues to guide my work today, helping me advocate for older adults and improve their quality of life on a broader and daily scale."

Share the impact Pitt Social Work had on you and/or update your contact information using the QR code below. We'd love to hear from you!



Pictured in the center in red is Josie Badger.

Momeyer Lecture Featured PEACOCK founder **Josie Badger**

The University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work's commitment to lived experience and diverse voices is reflected in the Florence Gibbs Momeyer Endowed Lecture, made possible through the generosity of Alan G. Momeyer (MSW '72) and his brother, Richard W. Momeyer, who established the lecture in 2021 to honor their mother, a social worker who fought to ensure that all children received a free quality education as promised in the Pennsylvania constitution. Alan Momeyer spoke and shared that they created the lecture because "the battle is not won yet…there exists in our society some opposition to and discrimination against" individuals with disabilities.

Previous speakers for the Momeyer Lecture were disability rights lawyer Haben Girma and autism activist and animal behavior scientist Temple Grandin. In September 2024, the school welcomed Josie Badger, who spoke about the crucial role of individuals with disabilities and their allies in shaping policy and driving systemic change. Dean Betsy Farmer began the event with a call to the audience to "open our minds and think about how we can be part of the solution."

Badger's lecture, "Inclusive Policy and Systemic Change: The Critical Role of Disabled Voices and Allies," delved into pressing disability issues, emphasizing the importance of inclusion, justice, and equity in policy making and systems change. Badger spoke about individuals with disabilities facing issues with housing, health care, and even marriage. "What are we telling people with disabilities," she asked, "and what are our policies telling the world about disability, about ableism, about the fact that somehow we not only have a physical or mental disability, but we are also unable to work, own a home, get married?" She noted that people with disabilities have been excluded for far too long from making decisions about their own lives and underscored the critical importance of incorporating disabled voices in the policy-making process, ensuring that their unique perspectives and needs are acknowledged and addressed.

The conversation with attendees after her lecture touched on the intersection of disability, policy, and justice to learn how we can collectively work toward a more inclusive and equitable society. "We are not talking about how disability is part of the human experience," Badger noted. "The disability community is just starting to talk about [intersectionality], but where we're missing is in other diversity conversations as members and not just visitors."

Badger received her bachelor's degree in disability law and advocacy from Geneva College, her master's degree in rehabilitation counseling from the University of Pittsburgh, and her doctorate in health care ethics from Duquesne University. She recently founded PEACOCK, a nonprofit that will further support the needs of the disability community and diversity, equity, inclusion, and access.

Find this recording on our YouTube Channel **@PittSocialWork**.

Continuing Education and Career Center Services



The University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work is excited to announce the integration of the VanKirk Career Center and our continuing education (CE) offerings into a unified initiative led by **Michele Gordon**, who joined us in November 2024 as the new director of career services and continuing education. This strategic role will focus on creating a seamless pathway for engagement, learning, networking, and mentorship within our community.

As part of this effort, the school is actively working to implement insights gathered from comprehensive internal assessments, including listening sessions and surveys conducted with alumni and students. These findings will inform the development of innovative programming and strengthen collaborative opportunities to continue to support our students and alumni throughout their career journeys.

On top of combining these efforts and building upon the strong foundation created, we will continue to provide live, virtual, and asynchronous CE course options for licensed professionals to obtain their necessary CE hours in the way that is most convenient for them.

You can find more information about current offerings and updates on our website.



Keep us updated!

Between our newsletters, this magazine, and more, we have many opportunities to highlight the exciting things happening in your life and we hope you will keep us updated. New job? New mailing address? Let us know so we can keep our systems updated and reach you with exciting opportunities.

Scan the QR code to update your personal or professional information.

2024 School of Social Work Alumni Award Recipients

Each year, the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work honors alumni who have made significant contributions to their community. On Nov. 14, 2024, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends came together to celebrate the newest cohort of Alumni Awards recipients.

CONGRATULATIONS AGAIN TO OUR 2024 ALUMNI AWARD RECIPIENTS!



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD

TRACY M. SOSKA (BASW '74, MSW '78)

Clinical Associate Professor Emeritus, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work

Tracy M. Soska is clinical associate professor emeritus and retired Community, Organization, and Social Action specialization chair at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, where he also was the continuing education director for 26 years. Soska helped to establish the satellite MSW programs at Pitt's Johnstown and Bradford campuses. For more than a decade, he co-led the University's Community Outreach Partnership Center, the forerunner of the University's current Community Engagement Centers, and the University's annual community engagement award now bears his name. He was an affiliated faculty member with the University Center for International Studies, notably its European Studies Center, through which he led two transatlantic forums on comparative community development, community work, and social policy.

Soska coauthored the book "University-Community Partnerships: Universities in Civic Engagement" and has written and presented nationally and internationally on community engagement in higher education, community organizing and development, citizen leadership, library social work, the community impact of gambling, settlement houses/community centers, and nonprofit/human services management and leadership. He has been active nationally with the Association for Community Organization and Social Action (ACOSA), having served as its national chair as well as editor of its Journal of Community Practice for many years. He also received ACOSA's Career Achievement Award. He was a founder of the Continuing Education Directors Network in Schools of Social Work, and he was active in commissions and councils of the Council on Social Work Education, from which he received the Community Service Award.

Prior to joining the University, Soska was a nonprofit executive with the Human Services Center Mon Valley and the Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance as well as a program administrator with the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh. A graduate of Leadership Pittsburgh Inc.'s first class, Soska continued to lead its annual community/neighborhood session for more than 30 years. He most recently served on the Allegheny County Library Association board of directors and as its president, during which time he helped to establish a library social work fellowship in collaboration with Pitt Social Work. Soska also has served for many years on the board of the Pleasant Hills Public Library, including several as its president, and has published in social work journals on library/social work collaboration and libraries as community centers. He has long been active in the Pitt Social Work Alumni Council, among many other community volunteer activities.



ADVANCING EXCELLENCE AWARD

N'DORAH Z. WALKER (MSW '99)

Family Liaison Specialist , U.S. Department of Justice

Born in Sierra Leone and raised in the United States, N'Dorah Walker exemplifies social work excellence through her dedication to service and advocacy. Motivated by her faith and the motto "service above self," she is an experienced leader in crisis and change management, addressing adversity, and dismantling systemic barriers. She has more than 25 years of experience in providing therapeutic support to children and families.

From 2001 to 2012, Walker served with the Arlington County, Virginia, Child and Family Services Division. She improved data collection, launched key initiatives, and increased child permanency rates by 130%. She helped to develop the nationally recognized Bridging the Gap Model for family support. Walker earned multiple honors, including Arlington County's Outstanding Social Worker Award and Social Work Award of Excellence.

In 2012, she joined the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, where she developed a coordinated response to reduce veteran homelessness, earning a Special Project Performance Award. She later worked with the U.S. Department of Defense and cofounded an initiative that enhanced child safety. She has been with the U.S. Department of Justice since 2020, delivering crisis support to overseas employees. She continues to receive recognition for exceptional service.

Walker is a licensed clinician and certified supervisor who mentors aspiring social workers. She also serves on the National Association of Social Workers Maryland Chapter Ethics Committee. She is deeply involved with Amie Academy Foundation, a nonprofit founded by her mother. The foundation built and supports Amie Academy in Sierra Leone, a secondary school providing free quality education to more than 400 children.



RISING STAR AWARD

RHONDA STROZIER (BASW '17, MSW '19)

Executive Director, Fineview and Perry Hilltop Citizens Council

Rhonda Strozier is a passionate community advocate who prides herself on supporting neighbors and curating opportunities for collective advocacy that promote change and improvement throughout the entire community. While Strozier has worked on the North Side of Pittsburgh for many years, she is a proud Hill District native. Growing up in an under-resourced community was a deciding factor in her decision to become a community leader.

She currently serves as executive director of Fineview and Perry Hilltop Citizens Council(s), an organization that represents the two neighboring communities of Fineview and Perry Hilltop. This spirit of collaboration in the shared vision has had a ripple effect in the community and allows the organization to serve both communities and the city at large. Strozier is known for her dedication to inclusion and belonging and her mission to ensuring that all neighbors have the resources and income they need to live comfortably and build wealth.

Strozier also is devoted to ensuring equity in existing housing and in housing development. She serves as a member of the Housing Justice Table and the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group's Vacant Property Working Group. She believes that every person is entitled to the basic necessities, which include, at the very minimum, health care, housing, food, and internet.



RISING STAR AWARD

KESS BALLENTINE (MSW '17, PHD '21)

Assistant Professor, Wayne State University School of Social Work

Kess Ballentine is an assistant professor at Wayne State University School of Social Work. She uses critical theory and mixed methods to uncover how organizational and local policy and practice affect individual and family outcomes. Her goal as a social work researcher is to have local impact while bridging siloed areas of the research to expose complex, cross-system interactions that maintain social injustices and harm family well-being while working through community-research partnerships to identify and implement innovative solutions. She currently works in Detroit, Michigan, where she is studying the impact of punitive workplace policies on worker well-being, how job quality affects parent-school relationships for low-paid workers, and how industry standards boards function as a mechanism to improve job quality. She also is the lead evaluator for a kinship and shared parenting intervention funded by the Children's Bureau.

Ballentine's research has been published in Health Affairs, the Journal of Family and Economic Issues, and New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy. Her service work includes serving as an editorial board member for Families in Society; a member of the Labor@Wayne advisory board; cochair of the Wayne State School of Social Work Committee on Antiracism, Diversity, and Social Justice; a member of the doctoral steering committee; and vice president of the Wayne Academic Union.



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK SERVICE AWARD

ANN MCCURDY (MSW '08)

Behavioral Therapist, UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, and Acting Director of Behavioral Health, Highland Detention at Shuman Center

Ann McCurdy is a licensed clinical social worker currently working as a behavioral health therapist at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh within the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine and acting behavioral health director at the newly re-formed Highland Detention at Shuman Center. She has more than 20 years of experience working with individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences, including court-involved youths. Her employment history includes case manager at the former Shuman Juvenile Detention Center; intake case worker for the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth, and Families; and mental health and wellness counselor and adjunct professor at Penn State Greater Allegheny. She is skilled in providing individual and group therapy, behavioral health assessments, gender-affirming care, healing-centered approaches, end-of-life care, and crisis intervention and in working with adolescents, young adults, and families at risk.

McCurdy has been a trusted practicum advisor for many local colleges and universities since 2018. She served as a Ward Home board member for Auberle from 2018 to 2023. She holds a Bachelor of Social Work from Slippery Rock University in addition to her Pitt Social Work degree and has extensive knowledge of the resources and social service systems within the city of Pittsburgh.

Do you know a Pitt Social Work graduate who is making an impact on the field at a local, regional, national, or international level? **Scan the QR code to learn more about the award categories and make a nomination for the 2025 Alumni Awards.**

Alumni Speaker Series Highlights Nontraditional Career Paths

A degree in the field of social work can open doors in hospitals, fundraising, law, and so much more. Using their degrees, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work alumni have pursued all types of jobs. In 2024, the Pitt Social Work Alumni Speaker Series highlighted some of the nontraditional careers that social work graduates have pursued. Thank you to the following alumni who joined us to expand on their journey after graduation.



Katherine Marshall (MSW '20)

Katherine Marshall kicked off the new series to speak about her experience as a travel social worker. Marshall graduated from Pitt Social Work in April 2020, became a licensed social worker later that year, and achieved her goal of becoming a licensed clinical social worker in 2023. She now travels the country, providing empathetic care to patients and families in hospital settings. In her talk, Marshall discussed her career and the process of getting licensure in different states and had a real conversation about money. She also talked about the importance of self-care.

"I have to regularly ask myself how I am adding joy and how I am upholding the values of social work and also upholding values in my own life," she said. "Reflecting professionally, personally, what do you want things to look like and not being afraid of what that answer looks like even if it looks different for other people."



Halle Mayes (BASW '97)

After graduating from Pitt Social Work, Mayes moved to Washington, D.C., for what she thought would be a short-term detour on her way to obtaining her master's degree. Today, she is a trusted top Democratic political fundraiser on Capitol Hill.

Mayes talked about the initial decision to start her business (HM Consulting), how her business has transformed over the years, and how her social work education resonates. "One of the cool things about having your own business, even though I've been doing the same thing for many years," she said, is that "every client, every project, every day is a new experience and a new landscape of what's happening."



Michael Dubinski (MSW '21)

After graduating from Pitt Social Work, Dubinski enrolled in Marquette University Law School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he used his MSW experience to focus his legal education on public interest law through various clinics and internships. Drawing on his practicum experience at Allegheny Health Network, Dubinski landed a job as a guardian ad litem attorney for the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee at its Milwaukee County Children's Court office.

"In the business world or a nonprofit setting, you're going to have such a better understanding of people and ultimately how to be a more effective advocate if you have a social work education under your belt," he said.

You can find recordings of our speaker series on our YouTube channel, @PittSocialWork. As we move forward, we will feature alums in traditional and nontraditional careers! Please email sswalums@pitt.edu if you're interested in being a speaker.

Alumni Council: Year in Review

The Alumni Council's mission is to create consistent opportunities for community and connection among the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work's students, staff, alumni, and friends. Over the past year, we've prioritized understanding how our members prefer to engage and have created a variety of opportunities to strengthen those connections. Our May retreat, bimonthly meetings, and the Pitt homecoming football game brought us together, while workshops, orientation, and classroom appearances helped us to connect with students. We've connected to fellow alumni at homecoming, at the annual alumni awards, and through the Alumni Speaker Series. It has been a fulfilling year, and we are committed to continuing to deepen our mission and impact.

MSW OPEN HOUSE PANEL

Twice a year, alumni join the admissions and recruitment team for a panel during MSW open houses. These panels are often the highlight of the day for students and prospective students, offering a unique opportunity to connect directly with alumni and hear their experiences.



Left to right: Talia Nevitt (MSW '19), MSW/MPH student Tiara Teague, Jasmine Wilson-Bryant (MSW '11), Ariel Goehring (MSW '17), Ke'Amber Ford (MSW '20), and Johnnie Geathers (MSW '13)

FALL STUDENT WORKSHOP

Sharise Nance (MSW '06) led a workshop for students on maintaining wellness and addressing compassion fatigue in social work practice. The session provided practical self-care strategies and insights for balancing the demands of a challenging profession.



RESUME WORKSHOP

Ke'Amber Ford (MSW '20) led an interactive resume-writing workshop for BASW students, providing them with practical insights and tools to craft strong, competitive resumes tailored to the social work field.

ORIENTATION

Alumni panelists Sharise Nance (MSW '06), founder of Vitamin C Healing, and Dev Hayostek (MSW '23), licensed social worker and HEART clinician at Pitt's Counseling Center, participated in the School of Social Work's student orientation, sharing their professional journeys and offering advice to incoming students, setting a tone of support and mentorship for the year ahead.

RETREAT

In spring 2024, the Alumni Council gathered for a retreat focused on team building and strategic planning. Discussions centered around how to stay grounded as a team while extending our reach into the social work community.

Left to right: Johnnie Geathers (MSW '13), Ariel Goehring (MSW '17), Ke'Amber Ford (MSW '20), Ashley Leskovetc (MSW '17), Micki McDonough (MSW '98, PhD '05), and Joanna Mittereder (MSW '86)



We look forward to more opportunities to connect with students, fellow alumni, and the broader community. Interested in getting involved or participating in one of our events?
Scan the QR code or email sswalums@pitt.edu to learn more!

HOMECOMING FOOTBALL GAME

Members of the Alumni Council hosted fellow alumni, students, and friends at the Pitt homecoming football game versus Youngstown State University. Go, Panthers!



Front of row to back: Johnnie Geathers (MSW '13), Ariel Goehring (MSW '17), and Micki McDonough (MSW '98, PhD '05)

ALUMNI SPEAKER SERIES

The Alumni Council is a strong partner in planning and facilitating the Alumni Speaker Series. In 2024, Ke'Amber Ford (MSW '20) hosted a conversation with Katherine Marshall (MSW '20) exploring her journey into travel social work; Bella Colletti (MSW '22) led a discussion with Halle Mayes (BASW '97) about her path to political fundraising; and Ariel Goehring (MSW '17) spoke with Michael Dubinski (MSW '21) about his decision to pursue a law degree. These sessions offer valuable insights into nontraditional career trajectories, inspiring students and alumni alike.

HOMECOMING

Alumni gathered in the Cathedral of Learning Commons Room for the Homecoming Welcome Back Reception. The event was a vibrant celebration of the Pitt community, providing an opportunity for alumni to reconnect and share memories of their time at Pitt.



Cindy Garvin (MSW '81), left, and Ariel Goehring (MSW '17)

ALUMNI AWARDS

The Alumni Council has always played an integral role in the annual Pitt Social Work Alumni Awards, whether by serving on the selection committee, volunteering at the event, or being honored for their outstanding contributions to the community. The event celebrates the achievements of our alumni and strengthens our bonds as a community.



News and Notes

1980s

DAVID FEEHAN (MSW ’81) organized a tribute to Minneapolis firefighters in August 2024 that included a keynote from U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar.

1990s

SAMANTHA BALBIER (MSW ’98) was named among the 2024 Women of Influence by the Pittsburgh Business Times. Balbier serves as director of the University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics and Elsie Hillman Civic Forum.

THOMAS “BO” GRAHAM (MSW ’95) was named principal of Catholic Central High School and John King Mussio Junior High School in Steubenville, Ohio.

MARICA T. HARRIS (MSW ’98) was elected the 26th international grand basileus of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., during its 60th International Biennial Boule in Houston, Texas.

JAN IVERY (MSW ’97) has been appointed associate dean for academic affairs at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University.

2000s

Recognized for volunteerism and commitment to equality and justice, **MEDINA JACKSON** (MSW ’03) won the Social Justice Advocate award during the University’s annual K. Leroy Irvis Black History Month celebration in 2024. Jackson is the director of engagement for P.R.I.D.E. (Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education) in Pitt’s Office of Child Development.

JAMIE PELUSI (BASW ’06), a former goalkeeper for Pitt women’s soccer ranking first in saves and second in save percentage, shutouts, and wins in Pitt’s all-time history, was inducted into the Pitt Department of Athletics Hall of Fame Class of 2024.

CHARLES SMALL (BASW ’06, MSW ’07) joined the University of Washington athletic department as senior associate athletic director for sport administration.

KIMBERLY WALLER (BASW ’08) was appointed in June 2024 as the next president and CEO of the United Way of the Coastal Empire in Savannah, Georgia.



Marica T. Harris


Jamie Pelusi


Kimberly Waller

2010s

Pennsylvania State Representative **AERION A. ABNEY** (MSW ’12) has been appointed to the University’s Board of Trustees as a commonwealth trustee.

KELLY BERTHOLD (MSW ’17), a senior staff member at the Penn State Psychological Clinic, created a free podcast called “Know Your FundaMENTALs.”

KYLE CRAWFORD (MSW ’12) published the book “Ambiguity Is the Answer: Timeless Strategies for Creating Change” in August 2024. The book reminds readers of what it takes to truly bring about change in a world dominated by powerful interests: the use of ambiguity.

DANIEL JACOBSON LÓPEZ (PhD ’19) was inducted into the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice Alumni Hall of Fame.

DENISE VALVO (MSW ’18) and University of Pittsburgh at Bradford MSW student Taylor Samuelson are part of the Chautauqua County, New York, Mobile Crisis Unit that won a 2024 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties. This prestigious award recognizes their exceptional service and dedication to supporting their community in times of crisis.

2020s

ANA T. FLORES (MSW ‘20, PhD ‘24) has accepted a tenure-stream assistant professor position at the New York University Silver School of Social Work.

MIRACLE JONES (MSW ‘20) was named to the New Pittsburgh Courier 2024 Fab 40 under 40.

ANETTE NANCE (MSW ’20) was awarded the Martin Luther King Jr. Impact Award from the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and successfully defended her dissertation, “The Impact of Influences Factoring in Black First- and Second-generation College Students’ Decision to Attend and Succeed in College,” at Point Park University.

STAVROULA XINOS (MSW ’24) and **DEV HAYOSTEK** (MSW ’23) were both named Bright Young People 2024 by Allies for Health + Wellbeing.

We want to hear about your accomplishments!
Email **sswalums@pitt.edu** with your updates.


Aerion A. Abney


Ana T. Flores


Anette Nance

Planned Gifts Provide Critical Funds to Sustain Vital Programs

Social work is engaged in so many critical and high-need areas of our society, and preparing the next generation of leaders and change-makers is a vital role for Pitt Social Work. Due to several federal and foundation grants, our school has been able to launch high-impact programs that provide essential financial support to students as they embark on these meaningful careers. However, when these grants conclude or funding priorities shift away from urgent societal needs, we risk having to discontinue these valuable programs unless we secure sustainable funding. Donor support is essential for both maintaining and expanding these initiatives.

Our cover story highlights Pitt's commitment to developing the next generation of child welfare professionals. Programs like CWEL offer federal financial assistance to students already employed in public child welfare agencies so that they can increase their skills and career options with an MSW. Periodically, other funding sources allow us to offer some financial support to students who are interested in child welfare but are not currently employed in the field. For instance, under the National Child Welfare Workforce Initiative, we were able to recruit and support students in this way for five years. However, when the funding expired (as nearly all federal and foundation grants do), sustainability of the program was not possible within our financial resources.

Hearing about this experience and deeply passionate about improving the child welfare system, an alumnus and his wife have stepped up to address this gap. By designating a significant portion of their estate to Pitt, David (SPH ´67G, SOC WK '71G) and Suzanne Grebe Kemple will address the need in Pitt Social Work to encourage and support students who want to pursue a career in child welfare.

Another alumnus, William J. Lelik (A&S '82, SOC WK '85G, GSPIA '89), was grateful for the impact a scholarship had on his own MSW experience and recognized how important funding can be in supporting students' work. Lelik's planned gift, made by designating Pitt Social Work as the beneficiary of his retirement assets, will provide funds for immediate use and will establish an endowment fund in the school. Endowments provide an annual distribution of support to the school in perpetuity. The combination of current use and endowed funds will allow Pitt Social Work to sustain an existing student support program, such as a fellowship program, or to create a new sustainable student support program.

Matching Your Priorities to Student Needs

Dean Betsy Farmer explained, "Alumni who 'pay it back' and 'pay it forward' are truly wonderful – many of our students struggle to make ends meet while they complete their degree. As we know, practicum placements are an essential way for students to get immersed in practice and learn in real-life settings. And they also take a great deal of time, which restricts students´ flexibility for additional employment. So, creating sustainable funding sources that can help support students as they do their practicum is incredibly helpful. Often this type of support makes it possible for a student to pursue their passion, complete their degree, and become the social work innovators and leaders that we need!"

Student support is a top fundraising priority in our school, and every gift makes a significant impact in the lives of our students! Scholarships, emergency funds, paid practicums, fellowships, are just a few examples of student support opportunities. By considering a planned gift, you can make an even greater impact than through your annual giving alone, while reducing your tax burden and even creating an income stream for you or a loved one. We invite you to consider planned giving as a way to make a lasting difference at the School of Social Work.

"It is truly wonderful to have donors like the Kemples who are so passionate about supporting students who want to work toward creating a more equitable, excellent, family-centered, and critical child welfare system. It has been a privilege to get to know them and witness their genuine commitment to supporting children and families, along with their dedication to the system that is designed to safeguard and nurture our youth. I have appreciated their insights into current issues in the field and how supporting students allows them to influence, into perpetuity, careers that will assure that Pitt students are leading the way far into the future."

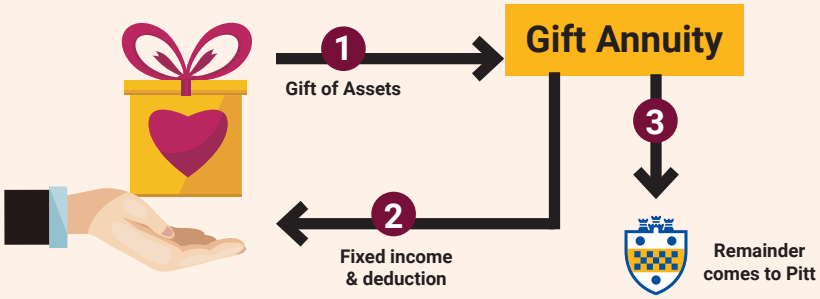
–Dean Betsy Farmer



Five Ways to Save on Taxes While Helping Pitt Through Planned Giving

1. Charitable Gift Annuities

- Immediate Tax Deduction
- Lifetime income stream for you or a loved one



2. Donating Appreciated Assets



- Avoids capital gains tax AND creates a tax deduction
- Frees cash for other uses

3. Bequest Designation

- Most popular planned giving option
- Could allow you to give more than you thought possible



4. IRA Beneficiary Designation

- Could save your heirs taxes
- Costs you nothing today



5. Qualified Charitable Distribution from an IRA

- Avoids income tax
- Counts as your RMD

To learn more about these and other planned giving tools, contact Katy Gallmeyer at kdw40@pitt.edu or +1 412-624-7729



Tune in to This Podcast

"HEALING OVERFLOW WITH DR. TOYA JONES," A SOCIAL WORK PODCAST



Toya Jones

From toxic relationships to childhood and adult trauma, Toya Jones, BASW program director and assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh, shares tips on how to heal and maintain good mental health. With guests like former Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Logan and Tamiko Dawkins, director of programs at Light of Life Rescue Mission, as well as numerous solo episodes, Jones covers it all. We asked her to share how this podcast started.

"I started the podcast in the middle of the pandemic. We, as a people, were hurting. We were struggling; I was struggling. I knew I could bring encouragement, mental health tips, and healing strategies to folks who could use them in such a difficult time. I am a trained trauma therapist and a faculty member who teaches clinical courses, so I wanted to bring the classroom to my laptop and offer a time for others to sit with me at my dining room table. When the COVID restrictions were lifted, I couldn't let go of my love for sharing healing tools. I felt that the School of Social Work should have a podcast to share therapeutic tips with others but also enlighten others about the vast social work profession. Social workers are in so many different careers helping people all over the world. So, I asked Dean [Betsy] Farmer if I could continue my podcast here at Pitt as a social work podcast. She said yes immediately, and the podcast continued here on campus. We are in the third season, and the podcast audience just keeps on growing," says Jones.

"As you heal, your healing will spill over onto everyone around you," Jones says, "so let's keep healing together!"

Scan the QR code for all the ways you can listen to the "Healing Overflow" podcast.

Enjoy these other podcasts!

A trailblazer in the digital audio world, Jonathan Singer (PhD '09) was among the first on the podcast scene in 2007. "The Social Work Podcast" provides information on all things social work, including direct practice (both clinical and community organizing), research, policy, education ... and everything in between. Singer has published more than 140 episodes exploring topics near and dear to every social worker's heart! You can listen to recent episodes of "The Social Work Podcast" by scanning the QR code.

Ian Kehinde, a civil engineering student at the Swanson School of Engineering, started the "Let's Talk Social Innovation" podcast in September 2023, with the goal to change communities through conversation.

The podcast has featured Pitt School of Social Work alums like Center on Race and Social Problems Director **Kyaien Conner** (MSW '04, PhD '08), visual artist **Morgan Overton** (MSW '20), and activist **Lisa Freeman** (BASW '02, MSW '04).

Scan the QR code to view all available episodes on YouTube!

Created by Kelly Berthold (MSW '17), the "Know Your Fundamentals" podcast is designed for professional moms navigating the challenges of work, family, and self-care, though its insights are valuable for anyone seeking personal growth and connection. The podcast breaks down complex concepts into relatable, actionable insights, offering listeners practical strategies to thrive in their personal and professional lives. Join the supportive community in our private Facebook group, Life, Family, and Career Wellness Support for Empowered and Thriving Professional Moms, to access exclusive content and connect with like-minded individuals and listen to the podcast by scanning the QR code.

In Memoriam

1960s

Robert K. Beckinger (MSW ’67)
Marilyn A. Hayes (MSW ’65)
Joan Munns (MSW ’67)
June E. Pilgrim (MSW ’65)

1970s

Marvin D. Feit (PhD ’75)
Richard G. Frey (MSW ’76)
John E. Gooch (MSW ’72)
Barbara Y. Jordan (MSW ’76)
Michael J. Reed (MS ’75)

1980s

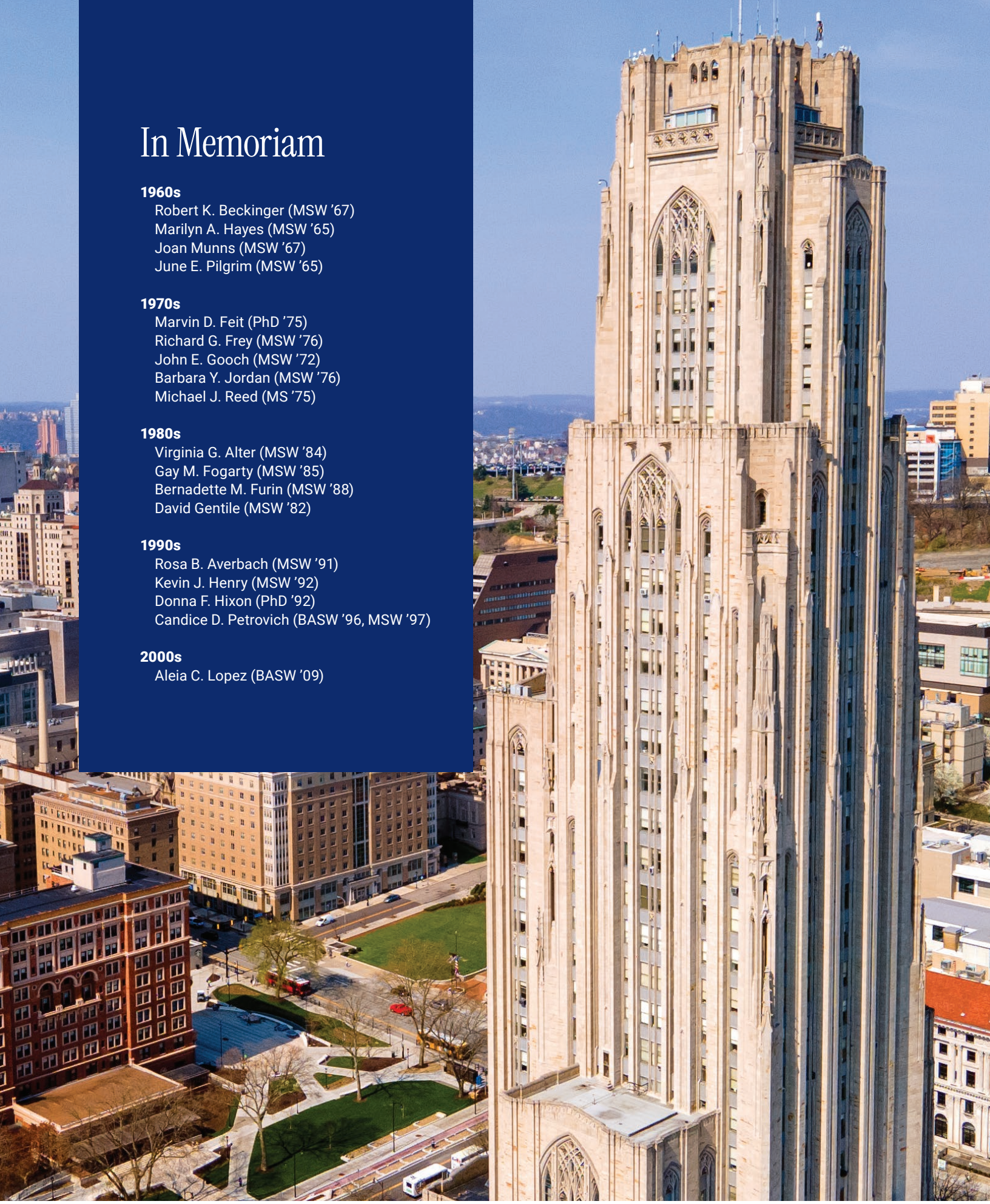
Virginia G. Alter (MSW ’84)
Gay M. Fogarty (MSW ’85)
Bernadette M. Furin (MSW ’88)
David Gentile (MSW ’82)

1990s

Rosa B. Averbach (MSW ’91)
Kevin J. Henry (MSW ’92)
Donna F. Hixon (PhD ’92)
Candice D. Petrovich (BASW ’96, MSW ’97)

2000s

Aleia C. Lopez (BASW ’09)



University of Pittsburgh
School of Social Work

2117 Cathedral of Learning
4200 Fifth Ave.
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

socialwork.pitt.edu

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PITTSBURGH, PA
PERMIT NO. 511

Together on 2.25.25

It's better when we're together.

When you join in on Feb. 25 for the ninth annual **Pitt Day of Giving (PDoG)**, you create amazing possibilities for our students, faculty and programs at the School of Social Work. And your gift can even help us unlock challenge funds available only on PDoG.

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
DAY OF GIVING
2.25.25

Starting on Feb. 18, go to **pi.tt/pdog25sw** to:

- make your gift,
- play the new PDoG video game featuring our campus mascots, and
- get details on challenges and more.

With you on our side, we're unstoppable.



#PittDayofGiving #PDoG25