The Year In Review

Over this past year the Social Work Program at UAF has been extremely active in supporting the core themes of the university’s mission:

**Educate**

Our faculty members Heidi Brocious, LaVerne Demientieff, Retchenda George-Bettisworth, and Kim Swisher offered a wide variety of courses over the academic year including: Introduction to Social Work; Ethics, Values & Social Work Practice; Social Welfare History; Social Welfare: Policies and Issues; Rural Social Work; Human Behavior in the Social Environment I & II; Child Abuse & Neglect; Research Methods in Social Work; Social Work Practice I & II, and Practicum in Social Work I & II.

The Social Work curriculum is available as traditional in-class—campus-based instruction, via distance delivery, and as special cohort-intensive instruction. If you are interested in taking classes, please contact one of our academic advisors.

Our current student body stands at 183 majors. We offer our students’ opportunities for club memberships through the Organization for Student Social Workers (OSSW); Alaska Native Social Workers Association (ANSWA); and our honor society, Phi Alpha.

**Research**

**Prepare**

**Connect**

**Engage**
by Brittany Van Sickle

We started our adventure in our Rural Social Work class. Heidi Brocious took our course work beyond the textbook, and wanted to give us a real look into actual rural social work practice. What better way to understand rural social workers than to interview them about real issues they faced in their communities.

Our research project took a look at dual relationships, their benefits, and how they were handled by rural social workers. We were able to find many wonderful participants that shared some very important information. Each of us in the Rural Social Work class were assigned an interview with a rural social worker, asking questions we, as a class, designed.

As the end of the Rural Social Work course neared, we had collected a lot of valuable information. It was very clear to many of us that we needed to do something with it. Heidi made this happen by creating SWK 440, an elective course that would allow us to continue our research. A total of five students followed the project into the next semester, Jenny York, Shari Clayton, Helen Shepard, Jackie Eisenberg and myself.

From the data that we had collected in the previous course, we began to transcribe, code, and develop themes. As a group, with the help of GoogleDocs, we drafted our research paper and submitted it to the Journal of Family Social work for publication. After several months, and some editing, we were all published authors!

This goes to show just what can be accomplished via distance education. Six people on a teleconference line, editing a GoogleDoc, may not have been the easiest route to take, but it worked and we learned so much from each other in the process. We are all so grateful to Heidi for giving us this opportunity. She took teaching to the next level, sharing her research skills with us, and opening doors for us that might have otherwise existed.

This is something that she continues to do. In April of this year, we were accepted to present our research findings at the counsel on undergraduate research conference in La Crosse Wisconsin. After helping us secure funding, we all piled on a plane with Heidi to share our research.

We are all so very thankful to Heidi and the social work department for giving us such a great education, and going out of their way to give us opportunities that don’t come along every day. It helped us to better understand those working in our state, and our profession as a whole.
Let's Chat: What year did you graduate, and how long did it take you to finish your degree?
Danielle LaFon: I graduated in 2011. It took 7 years.

What was it about Social Work that attracted/interested you?
When I started school in 2004 I was a criminal justice major with intention of going to law school; however, after 2 years into my studies I realized that it wasn’t a good fit for me. At the time I didn’t even know what social work was, so I took a year off of school to refocus my direction. It was during that year that I discovered social work. Social work seemed to fit with my desire to advocate for social justice, human rights, and improve the overall quality and wellbeing of one’s life.

When did you first know that this was the degree for you?
During “Introduction to Social Work” I learned about social injustice and personal resiliency. My values suddenly had a name that later blossomed into meaning and action.

Did you participate in any club activities (OSSW, ANSWA, Phi Alpha)?
I participated in OSSW and Phi Alpha.

What was your impression of the faculty/staff/students in the program?
Everyone in the program, whether it was faculty or students, offered a different element and expertise that was both challenging and insightful. They provided me with an opportunity to learn and grow. These differing views and experiences are important not only during your education but also during your career.

In what area did you complete your practicum?
I completed my practicum at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital. During my placement I had the opportunity to work with different departments including: Intensive Care, Pediatrics, Nursery, Behavioral Health, and the Emergency Department.

Was your placement what you expected/desired?
My placement was exactly where I wanted to be. It taught me technical skills, community resources, and the strength to support people during their most vulnerable moments.

Describe your interactions/relationship with your agency supervisor.
I was very privileged to work with a practicum supervisor who offered me wonderful one-to-one supervision, a healthy working knowledge of community resources, and an uncanny ability to know when I needed to be challenged. She was very good at helping me see the
Describe your transition from your senior year to your current employment.
I already had a job that I loved while I was in school so I was lucky enough to wait until the right position came along before I made the transition into a career in social work. I knew early on in my education that I wanted to do hospital social work, so I obtained my license as a certified nursing assistant and got a job in the Intensive Care Unit at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital while I worked on my degree. This allowed me to gain experience with hospital systems, interdepartmental and discipline collaboration, and knowledge of medical conditions and treatment. Once I was offered a position at the hospital as a social worker, the transition was smooth. The most difficult part was leaving my cherished position in the ICU.

Describe your current position. What do you find most enjoyable/challenging about being a social worker?
I am the emergency department and outpatient department social worker, which means I am stationed full time in the emergency department and am on call for outpatient departments including outpatient surgery, infusion therapy, cardiology clinic, wound care, and the diabetes center. My role as a hospital social worker is to develop, coordinate, and provide social work services to patients and families who are faced with social, emotional, and situational stressors precipitated by illness, injury and/or disability.

The most challenging part of my job is the lack of community resources. Unfortunately, this is not a new concept; social workers have always been asked to do more with fewer resources. It’s emotionally challenging for a helping professional to listen to a clients’ concerns and clearly see their needs, but have no way of meeting these needs due to a lack of resources. The most enjoyable part of being a social worker is being able to make a difference; whether it’s connecting a client to resources, offering support during a client’s most vulnerable moments, validating a clients’ challenges, experiences, and feelings, or simply offering education, I am making a difference in people’s lives.

What are your plans for the near future?
Currently I am continuing my professional development in the field and exploring graduate opportunities. In the fall I look forward to having my own practicum student.

What advice would you have for a young adult considering social work as a professional career choice?
When considering any professional career choice I highly recommend doing a job shadow with several different agencies. Job shadowing is an excellent way to glean first hand witness to the career and will also provide you with the opportunity to map out the best educational pathway to meet your career goals.

Student Awards
Heather Helfrich (right) was our Outstanding Student of the Year, and Jenny York (left) received the Gray S. Tilly Memorial Award.