New SSW dean champions community, technology

By Faith Dawson, Tulane Communications

The newly relocated Tulane University School of Social Work helped win over Patrick Bordnick, the school’s new dean, who took over in July. The downtown location offers the opportunity for community intervention events; heavy pedestrian traffic from nearby Canal Street could lend itself to getting the word out about health screenings, suicide prevention, addiction treatment and other services.

Bordnick’s goal is to blend the school’s initiatives and mission into the community so that it leads to a better quality of life for New Orleanians.

“As a university we have intellectual capital, and we have students who want to work in the community. So when we … become partners with our community, great things really happen,” he said.

Before Tulane, Bordnick was a professor and associate dean for research at the University of Houston, where he studied addiction using technology like virtual reality to help people find support, practice coping skills and ultimately change unhealthy behaviors. Bordnick believes that portable virtual reality on smartphones can bridge the gap between the clinic and real world. He’ll continue that research at Tulane, working across disciplines.

Other priorities include improving the school’s ranking, instituting online learning, expanding the school’s reach and building a brand. The branding would include helping students develop strong clinical practice skills, an area in which Tulane already excels, expanding the curriculum to include...
MSW graduate helps other Wounded Warriors

Spring 2016 Tulane Master of Social Work graduate Jeremy Brewer, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, served two deployments in Iraq from 2001-05, but the plan was always to finish his degree.

After earning an undergraduate degree in psychology, Brewer decided that a graduate degree in social work was the best way to use his experiences to help other vets transitioning back to civilian life.

“The hardest part of the transition for me was trying to find my next mission or purpose,” said Brewer, who served as an infantryman and then a four-man fire team leader. “In the Marine Corps, I knew what my mission was and what I needed to do to accomplish it. The other hard part is missing the camaraderie inherent in the service and trying to find something similar in the civilian world.”

Brewer’s graduate internship in the outpatient mental health clinic of the Veterans Affairs Hospital provided him mental health treatment experience with both individuals and groups.

“I learned a lot over there,” Brewer said. “Not only about the profession and helping people, but also about the bureaucratic side of the VA. It was a great experience.”

Brewer also worked at the St. Bernard Project where he supported the veterans in the Americorps program through their transition to civilian life by helping them set goals for after the program and helping them map out how to get there.

Brewer was so eager to continue to help his fellow veterans that he completed his 990-hour internship early to accept a position as an outreach coordinator for the Wounded Warrior Project to help open the group’s New Orleans office, which will cover Louisiana and Mississippi.

“To know that some of the things that I’ve gone through can be used to help others who are going through similar things is very rewarding,” Brewer said. “Especially with my internship at the VA, I had an advantage with our clients because I am a vet. They knew that I had been there and had some common experience. It’s been pretty awesome.”

Brewer, who has been married for 13 years, has three daughters – 10, 8 and 14 months.

“I look at it now, and I don’t know how I had time for this,” he said. “I worked full-time the whole time I was in undergrad and graduate school. I wish I had a good answer for how I did it. I just took care of the things right in front of me and then moved to the next thing.”

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NAREA: IT’S THIS IDEA OF FORMING A COMMUNITY

of Social Work along with fellow 2015 MSW graduates Molly Fleder, Jessica Lovell and Lauren James. The project was a collaboration between library personnel, library patrons, Tulane and the YMCA Literacy Program that conducted a survey of library patrons to determine their needs and interests. The survey found that 60 percent of the individuals at the library during a weeklong period were either currently experiencing homelessness, formerly homeless or at-risk of being homeless.

Taking cues from cities like San Francisco, Dallas and Greensboro, they started offering classes and other services to help the community, but Narea said he also wanted to ensure that the library had a better sense of community.

“There was just apathy among the patrons,” he said. “The people who were going here were just not engaged at all. They didn’t talk to each other or the staff. I’d like the library to be a hub that is open to anyone because that is Step One to helping people.”

Thanks to a $1,500 Spark Innovation Award from the Taylor Center, Narea started the weekly meet up and free social work office hours following the free donuts and brew, donated fresh weekly by Congregation Coffee.

“It’s this idea of forming a community,” he said. “If people know each other and are happy to be here, they’ll respond better to outreach and feedback. It’s about building a community that supports and helps each other.”

Now, that the Spark Award has been exhausted, Narea is hoping other Tulane social work students and community members will keep the outreach going.

“The next step is definitely keeping coffee and donuts,” he said. “This has a following, and new people show up every week. It’s amazing, so it would be a huge shame if we can’t keep it going.”

Oliveira and Fleder have maintained the outreach since the Spark Award expired, and the library is considering adding a social work intern to provide referral services for those who need it. At a recent August outreach, they served more than 100 individuals during the hour-long window.

Anyone interested in participating should contact Deborah at doliveir@tulane.edu or (504) 862-3494.
Although our alumni are no longer roaming our halls in search of knowledge, our students are just as hungry as those more experienced hands who are reading this. Here are just a couple projects going on in the community, in the classroom and in our faculty’s research arenas.

Louisiana Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser will chair a Leadership Advisory Council that will help identify and select participants and provide oversight for a fellowship program designed by the Tulane School of Social Work’s Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy (DRLA).

The Disaster Resilience Leadership Fellowship Program will identify emerging Gulf Coast leaders and equip them with the knowledge and tools needed to more effectively develop and implement plans that strengthen the resilience of their communities to future oil spills and other disasters.

“This program is important to help represent our coastal communities and provide leadership and insight to support them during emergency preparation and a disaster,” said Nungesser, who served as Plaquemines Parish president during the 2010 BP oil spill.

The fellowship program includes two in-person, week-long, residential executive leadership training workshops that promote peer-to-peer learning and networking. In addition, each DRL Fellow is responsible for creating an action plan that identifies a resilience-building activity that will ensure sustainable livelihoods and protect the Gulf of Mexico region’s invaluable resources.

In partnership with the Consortium for Resilient Gulf Communities, Tulane’s Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy has contextualized its global Disaster Resilience Leadership Fellowship Program curricula to identify and address leadership challenges that face Gulf communities. The consortium was established in 2015 with a three-year grant from the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative to assess and address the public health, social and economic impacts of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

As chair of the advisory council, Nungesser will help recruit council members willing to serve a one-year term and who are experts from government and non-government organizations, universities/technical schools, businesses, and local community groups. The council will identify and invite Disaster Resilience Leadership Fellows from Jefferson, Lafourche, Plaquemines, St. Bernard and Terrebonne parishes and provide oversight of the fellows’ progress and effectiveness as they move through the program.

As Rwanda continues to close its 34 orphanages opened after the 1994 genocide, professors at the Tulane School of Social Work’s Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy are working to train the country’s social workers to help the affected children.

Alumna wins top transplant award

Beth Mosele (MSW ’78) and Pat Voorhes claimed top honors from the Society for Transplant Social Workers (STSW) at its 2015 annual conference in Columbus, Ohio. Each year, STSW recognizes two social workers for significant contributions to the transplant field.

Mosele won the Lee Suszycki Award, which honors the STSW’s founder. Mosele has been a medical social worker for 38 years. For the past 12 years, she has worked as a heart transplant-mechanical circulatory support (MCS) social worker. She entered the advanced heart failure field at Methodist Hospital-Texas Medical Center and then moved to the Center for Advanced Heart Failure at the Memorial Hermann Texas Medical Center. For the past three years, she has developed a social work program that was recognized as a best practice by the Joint Commission in the fall of 2014.

Mosele is a Certified Clinical Transplant Social Worker (CCTSW) and is one of the first STSW members to receive the Certified Clinical Social Worker-Mechanical Circulatory Support (CCSW-MCS) credential. Mosele has been an active STSW Board member and is the MCS member-at-large while serving on the credentialing committee. Mosele earned her bachelor’s degree from Southwestern University in 1974 and received her MSW from Tulane in 1978.

Voorhes won the Judy Midelfort Memorial Award after joining the Transplant Department at the University of Utah Medical Center in April 2008. She has worked as a living donor advocate and as a social worker for heart, lung, kidney, liver & MCS patients and living donors.
Alumna completes degree in Armenia

Julane School of Social Work alumna Amy L. Sandridge (MSW ’15) took a unique road to finishing her MSW degree.

With only seven credits remaining for her MSW degree, Sandridge, PhD, MSPH, LMSW, spent the 2015-16 academic year on a unique study abroad experience as faculty at the American University of Armenia. She was able to complete her remaining MSW classes – Professional Project, Capstone and an independent study on the status of children in care in Armenia – all while teaching 98 students at American University in Yerevan, Armenia.

Sandridge taught several classes over the academic year including Research Methods and Epidemiology courses to graduate students and Global Health courses to undergraduates.

“Armenia is at the crux of the globalization issue,” Sandridge said. “On the one hand, theoretically, globalization should benefit this population of 3 million. On the other hand, they must cope with protecting their culture with its unique religion and language that has survived intact since 301 A.D.”

One example of the globalization challenge for Armenia that Sandridge’s independent study explored was the institutionalization of children. According to Sandridge, most orphaned children who are institutionalized are not true orphans and have family members, even parents, but these relatives are unable to keep the children usually due to extreme poverty. A recent review of the current Armenian boarding school system reported that the majority of institutionalized children visit their parents weekly, while receiving room, board and vocational training.

“Armenia is a complex culture which has struggled for autonomy for centuries given its place in the Caucasus Mountains surrounded by Islamic cultures to the west, east and south and Russia in the north,” Sandridge said. “Following the 1896 to 1921 pogroms and genocides, Armenia was formally annexed, some say colonized, by the Soviet Union in 1922. Subsequently, Armenians suffered the purges of Stalin, and food insecurities throughout the 60’s and 70’s.”

In 1988, Armenia experienced a massive earthquake which had the resultant positive effect of bringing social work into the country with the support of the diaspora and the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. The Soviets departure in 1992 brought more struggles to the population as many Armenians emigrated to the United States and Canada. Armenia is still in a period of transition – economically and socially, Sandridge said.

Additionally, Sandridge completed her Professional Project – a qualitative investigation of the psychosocial health of New Orleans Police Department officers – supervised by Dr. Charles Figley. Sandridge focused on little researched areas such as injuries sustained while on the job, the effect of low wages, difficulties in finding employment once leaving the police force and public perceptions, especially those being experienced currently. She earned her master’s degree in Dec. 2015.

Sandridge will present the results from both projects at the American Public Health Association Conference in Denver this November. She also is working on a White Paper for Lumos, a JK Rowling charity, on the institutionalization of children in Armenia.

Amy Sandridge (MSW ’15) spent the past year at the American University of Armenia in Yerevan, Armenia, while finishing up her final three MSW courses. (Courtesy Photo)
Alumni Spotlight

ALUMNA HELPS SHAPE ALABAMA AFTER FOUNDING STATE’S FIRST WOMEN’S SHELTER IN 1979

W hatever there has been a need in her community, alumna Kathryn Calogrides Coumanis (MSW ’70) has stepped in to help fill it.

Last September, Coumanis was honored by AL.com as One of the 34 Women Who Shape the State of Alabama as she founded Penelope House in 1979, which was the fifth shelter for battered women in the United States.

“I was very humbled by it,” she said. “I appreciate the recognition, but I was just doing my job.”

Coumanis has worked in child protective services all her life and started her social work career with the State of Alabama Department of Human Resources as a state office administrator in child protective services.

But the idea for Penelope House began when she heard a radio report about shelters in England. At the time, there were no shelters in Alabama, so Coumanis talked her Greek women’s group – the Daughters of Penelope – into starting Alabama’s first women’s shelter.

“We had $26 in our budget,” she said. “We found a house for it. There was a shelter in Jacksonville, Fla., so that was the closest one to us at the time. We went to visit them, and they gave us their manual and showed us their operation. We came back, and I rewrote the manual. We set up some policies, and that’s when it began.”

On March 19, 1979, the shelter opened with an uncertain future.

“It took a lot of nerve,” she said. “I had several people tell me that I was committing professional suicide, and I thought ‘Well, I guess I could go back to teaching first grade.’”

But the shelter received support from the faith-based community and local government as the Mayor of Mobile provided a grant writer – who still works with the group today – to help write grants, which back then consisted of two pages of narrative and one page of budget.

Now, Penelope House has a nearly $2 million annual budget and more than 40 staff members.

“I wanted it to be a professional agency and not just a bunch of volunteers,” she said. “I felt like the complexity of problems that these women were facing required that they needed to be dealing with professionally trained social workers. We wanted to give them the best we had to offer.”

Despite the long hours, Coumanis, who served as the group’s Executive Director twice and still works there today, said she’d do it again in a heartbeat.

“As soon as I realized there was a need, I had to respond to it,” she said. “I couldn’t walk away from it. The social work needs of domestic violence victims are very complex. They are not like other clients. We help women from all parts of the community, and 60 percent of the population in this field are children.”

Now, Penelope House has expanded its services to include a child therapist, outreach programs, prevention education, community education and training for law enforcement. Coumanis’ daughter has served as executive director since 2008 after working in medical social work for nearly 20 years.

“There is nothing better than watching social workers do what they were trained to do without so many restrictions,” she said, adding that since Penelope House was the first of its kind in the state that it was able to work with the legislature to help set state guidelines that were fair and effective for its clients.

Even with all the effort it took to found and grow Penelope House, Coumanis had other responsibilities as well. She worked with the State Department of Human Resources for years and has been an adjunct professor in sociology at Spring Hill College since 1981 teaching both Intro to Social Welfare and Intro to Social Gerontology.

So how did she make time for everything?

“I never thought about that because I just knew what I had to do, and I did it,” she said. “There is nothing more exciting than having the opportunity and the privilege to start an agency from scratch and see it grow. It is the biggest privilege of my life, and it didn’t start out that way. All I wanted to do was to get something going and turn it over to one of the other agencies.”

She also wrote a book in 2010 called “You Can’t Beat an Alabama Woman,” which chronicles the creation of Penelope House.

Coumanis credits her Tulane education for helping her achieve her goals.

“It was the best school available, and I think I made the best choice,” she said. “Once I got there, I knew I made the right decision. It is a wonderful school, and they encouraged you to think outside the box. It was a great experience for me. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Coumanis, who has been married to husband Nick for 55 years, has two children and four grandchildren along with a dog and a step-dog.
Roughly one million people in the United States are on disability for mental health reasons, and Tulane Master of Social Work part-time student Alex Fixler is working to help reduce that number.

This May, Fixler was awarded a yearlong $10,000 grant from the Policy Research, Inc., which is funded by the Social Security Administration's Disability Determination Small Grant program. The grant will allow her to explore early interventions to help people with affective disorders like major depression stay in the workforce, have more productive and satisfying lives and not become permanently disabled.

"I’m really looking forward to it," Fixler said. "I think it is going to be an exciting project. I’m very interested in the outcome, and I’m hopeful that it will inform my work in the future. It will also be an opportunity to learn to do research more intensively, which is exciting."

Fixler’s project is one of eight selected from across the country with other awards going to Ph.D. candidates at UC Berkeley, University of Iowa, Northeastern, Brandeis, Vanderbilt, and NC State. She’s the only social work Masters level student to earn the grant.

"Major depressive disorder is the most prevalent global disability, according to the World Health Organization, and accounts for nearly half of lost workplace productivity in America," Fixler said. "An early intervention program could help people stay engaged in meaningful work experiences and get the help they need to prevent a life of disability and disconnection. I think such a program could ultimately extend the reach of services to almost anyone who experiences depression in America, not only those who are on the path to being disabled by it."

Fixler said the focus topic for the grant came from her work in case management for the past four years, most recently with permanent supportive housing, and in consultation with her advisor on the project, Deborah Oliveira, a LCSW serving as TSSW’s assistant director of field education.

"Working in the field a little while, it feels like a lot of things that happen to people are preventable, but there aren’t any structures in place to help. It just seems like early intervention is not prioritized," she said.

Fixler currently is completing her MSW field placement at the Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights in their policy department, where she provided secondary research on a policy report, which was ultimately part of a successful LCCR-directed push to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction in Louisiana from 16 to 17 years of age. That experience ignited her desire to tackle more research opportunities.

As part of the grant, Fixler will interview people who already receive Social Security benefits for depression in an effort to learn what type of resources would have been helpful in maintaining them in the workforce.

"I’m going to compile all of that data and try to identify ideas for resources that don’t already exist now or that don’t kick in until later," she said. "There are programs to get people back into the workforce, but studies show that those are less effective. Once people are out of the workforce for a year, they tend to have a really hard time getting back into it."

Fixler said the ultimate goal of her research would be to find ways to use resources sooner and more effectively to help people with mental health issues stay in the workforce and have a higher quality of life.

**Continued from Page 1....**

**BORDNICK: Community Partnerships are key to success**

nonprofit management, and emphasizing the school’s disaster mental health certificate and resilience program within local and global contexts.

After Katrina, residents know they are resilient, Bordnick said, adding that New Orleans is well positioned to keep moving forward with issues like education and health care because so many people already love living here.

"I think you really build upon that synergy of the richness of the city and warmth of the city and the resiliency," he said. "I see that as a plus, in that we can really provide community awareness about social services.

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Giving back helps students move forward

By Mary-Elizabeth Lough, Development

Michael Spencer (MSW ’15) has dedicated his life to giving back, and with the assistance of generous School of Social Work alumni, he is now able to give even more to a community that has given him so much.

After spending more than a decade working in maternal and child health, Spencer knew that he’d found his calling, but in order to expand his skill set and allow his work to make a more profound impact, he needed to go back to school.

Tulane offered a perfect solution in the form of a combined MSW/MPH dual degree offered through the School of Social Work and the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Although Spencer looked forward to a rigorous Tulane education and was excited to work in the New Orleans community, high tuition might have put his dream on hold. Fortunately, thanks to the generous alumni who give annually to TSSW, Spencer received financial assistance that enabled him to move forward with his dream of changing lives.

Spencer not only completed his MSW in December 2015, but he also served as Student Government Association President at TSSW.

Dean Patrick Bordnick has designated that all annual alumni gifts to TSSW will support student scholarships. Therefore, each year your annual gift to TSSW directly helps students. This allows Tulane to attract and retain high-achieving scholars regardless of their financial backgrounds and provides support for fieldwork and internships.

Spencer sees the generosity of School of Social Work alumni as far-reaching. Not only does it provide student support at Tulane, “The gift you make today makes social work possible for all who need it tomorrow.”

If you are interested in making an annual gift or want to learn more about how to help the School of Social Work, contact Verna Aucoin at vaucou1@tulane.edu 504-314-7361 or go to giving.tulane.edu.

Every gift, no matter the size, aids students as they give back to the community by doing work that matters.
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1) What are you currently doing professionally?

2) Have you received any special awards or honors, or have you been published? Please specify.

3) Have you been involved with Tulane School of Social Work since graduation? If not, what events or special services would draw you to become involved?

4) Do you have special news that you would like to share with other alumni (marriage, children, relocation, hobbies, new projects)?

5) Is there anything you would like to start seeing in Postscripts? Is there anything you think should be omitted from the newsletter?

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