The AEIR Scholars program prepares master’s social work students to respond to the unique needs and challenges of refugee and immigrant communities.

By Jordan Osterman

OF THE COMMUNITY

AEIR Scholar Manuela Gonzalez ‘18 MSW
Even before the country officially became the United States, the roots of social work in North America were well established. As government responses proved insufficient to the growing needs of the American population, private groups came together and played increasing roles.

At the heart of those needs were those of the drastically increasing immigrant population: Hundreds of thousands of people poured into the United States in the late 18th and early 19th century, and the field of social work coalesced in large part around the fact those people needed help.

Today, at the St. Thomas School of Social Work, that fact has helped evolve the dynamic Area of Emphasis in Practice with Immigrants and Refugees (AEIR) Scholars program within the Master of Social Work. The program – which started in 2014 – prepares master’s social work students to respond to the unique needs and challenges of refugee and immigrant communities, both groups that are on the rise in numbers and yet remain largely underserved in both Minnesota and the nation.

Among the 12 to 15 students in the AEIR program each year, many are themselves members of refugee and immigrant communities. These situations create the dynamic quality of social workers understanding best their communities’ needs – and the right way to respond – because they are of that community themselves.

“Only people within the community can have that deep, complex, beautiful sense of how culture, beliefs and family history all come together to make certain things work and others not work,” said Eva Solomonson, founding faculty coordinator of the AEIR program. “That expertise is in the community itself. We can then add on the universal framework of social work best practice, so these women or men get the framework on top of their own expertise of culture and community. That’s where really unique, adapted practice happens.”

**Part of the culture**

Growing up with her immigrant father and grandparents, AEIR Scholar Manuela Gonzalez always knew she wanted to work with the Latino community. When she arrived in Minnesota from Pennsylvania in 2011, she began actively working with the Twin Cities’ large Latino population.

As an outpatient case manager Gonzalez quickly saw how big the demand was for bilingual social workers with an intimate understanding of the immigrant experience.

“There’s a familiarity, almost, an unspoken understanding and comfort. Little things, nuances, that you don’t have to explain. … The comfortability and familiarity, at least for me, I was raised in that culture,” said Gonzalez, who had her first experience working with refugees at St. Thomas’ Interprofessional Center for Counseling and Legal Services. “It’s one thing to speak a language; it’s another to be part of a culture. My case load shot up immediately. … The need is there, especially in the times we’re in now.”
Amid the anti-immigrant and -refugee rhetoric of many across the country, there is a complex mix of emotions for the social workers helping immigrants and refugees every day.

“[Our work] feels necessary now more than ever, but people are scared,” Gonzalez said. “You just never know. Someone who's been a resident for 30 years is terrified [of being deported]. I can't imagine someone who doesn't have that security, aren't at stable points in their lives. Most of my clients are undocumented. There's that overarching uncertainty and fear. … It's always present.”

As the field of social work as a whole grapples with those realities, Solomonson said the AEIR Scholars are responding in the right way.

“It is absolutely lighting a fire in these students,” she added. “It is an inspiration.”

**Everybody helping each other**

Whether students are directly from a refugee or immigrant family themselves, everyone in the two-year AEIR program receives an education steeped in serving those communities. Courses, course assignments, research, field practicum and events are specific to serving immigrants, refugees, their families and communities, and added emphasis is placed on networking within the refugee- and immigrant-serving professional fields.

“Minnesota is a great place for social work education; we are really a serious hub of human rights,” Solomonson said. “I put a high premium on getting out in the community and meeting people while they're students so they can see where they can potentially work, refer or get help from.”

That kind of help is second nature for AEIR Scholar Novia Josiah, who grew up “in a family of collective community, everybody helping each other.”

As a Karen refugee from Burma, Josiah started life in Thailand before coming to the United States in 2004. After becoming the first Karen student to receive her BSW in Minnesota, Josiah began working at the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) and in May 2018 became the first Karen MSW graduate.

“I see the needs in my community that we really need to have a culturally appropriate approach or service, especially in the mental health field. That's why I decided to come here, because of the AEIR program,” she said. “I grew up in the community and lived through that experience, so I have that understanding of what it's like to be a refugee or immigrant coming to settle in the new country, with different people, different culture. It’s helped me to understand them more, the cultural piece. I can speak from my own community, I know the language, culture, resources, and what's needed.”
Coming from a place of love

For another classmate of Gonzalez and Josiah, there is a painful level of understanding for what many people arriving in the United States are leaving behind. In 2006, Harriet Oyera arrived in Minneapolis alone after fleeing Uganda following her torture and the murder of her husband at the hands of the Lord’s Resistance Army, a violent rebel group.

After being referred from the CVT, Oyera worked for years with St. Thomas School of Law Professor Virgil Wiebe’s Immigration Clinic at the Interprofessional Center for Counseling and Legal Services. Eventually she was granted asylum and joined in Minnesota by her four children. As Oyera and her children built their lives here and she dove into community work in Minneapolis, Oyera learned more about the tenants of social work and the AEIR Scholars program and “was called beyond myself to do this work.”

“Knowing I am an immigrant, I have this love, coming to the United States, knowing we are supporting immigrants and refugees. But it’s not enough. I joined this program and I love it because I need to encourage other immigrants to understand they belong to this country,” Oyera said. “I’ve gone through a lot and reached a point where I feel a human being must never suffer like that. … We can fit as human beings and serve one another without conflict, if given the opportunity of understanding each other.”

“We have to find the common good, and if there’s a weakness in me or in another, let’s empower each other and get the results we want,” she added. “My drive as a social worker is to show we have got to be supportive of one another.”

For the AEIR Scholars of St. Thomas School of Social Work, every day is about becoming the best supporters of immigrant and refugee communities they can be.

“There’s a saying, ’Be the person you needed when you were younger,’” Gonzalez said. “I want to be a person that could have helped my dad when he needed it. As a kid I helped him, but it’s nice to be someone another kid’s parents need, so that kid doesn’t have to be.”

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