During the past year, recent graduates and faculty members have embarked on social work projects in Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia. Here are three of their stories.
Andrea Prince (BSSW ’08) Accepts Position in Ghana

Andrea Prince recently accepted a position as a Program and Volunteer Coordinator for an organization called Village Exchange International/Ghana (VEI/VEG) located in Ho, Ghana. As an undergraduate in 2007, she spent a semester studying at the University of Ghana in Lagen, Ghana, and it was during this time that her initial interest in international career opportuni-ties developed.

According to Prince, Village Exchange International strives to empower Ghana’s disadvantaged women through three primary pillars of intervention: poverty alleviation strategies, reproductive and sexual health programs, and research including quantitative and qualitative methods applied to women’s health issues. The VEI/Ghana’s poverty alleviation program currently incorporates two project areas. The first involves credit services for women using the VEI Microfinance Institute. VEI aims to increase women’s access to capital for business development. The organization’s main goal is to increase access to credit facilities in order to empower women by giving them the financial means necessary to improve the lives of their families and communities.

The second project area involves the development and support of market-led businesses. In these ventures, VEI acts as the entrepreneur, providing the market research, product chain development, and infrastructure development of businesses to support young women.

The two businesses that have resulted as a product of this initiative include Lady Volta Beads, a small business that started with women from the Takla Gbogame village creating beautiful, culturally influenced jewelry for profit. The second business venture is Lady Volta Batik, a program in which young mothers are able to continue learning to become seamstresses while earning enough income to help care for their families.

VEI Reproductive and Sexual Health programs seek to improve access to information on reproductive and sexual health issues, as well as to provide support and realistic solutions for young mothers and other identified groups. Their current initiatives include a Teen Pregnancy Survey, the VEG Youth Centre, and the Takla Gbogame Awareness program. “Our organization is continuing to grow,” says Prince. “We also run projects in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Centre of Community Studies Action and Develop-ment (CENCOSAD) in Accra. We hold after school clubs that promote positive images for young women, teach life skills, and promote learning. Examples of our current successes include a photography project, writing clubs, drawing clubs, and a girls club.”

Another of VEG’s primary goals in relation to their reproductive and sexual health programs is to target youth to be peer educators in sexual and reproductive health. Having completed an MSSW from Columbia University in New York, Prince finds her current work very fulfilling. She attributes a portion of her success to the foundation she established at the CSW.

Prince says, “Throughout my career at UTCSW, I was supported and encouraged to take a less traditional path. I was allowed to complete social work courses and field work at the University of Ghana, and I was taught how to translate my skills and knowledge in the field of international social work. I feel the work I am doing now is both exciting and challenging, and I know I am well prepared for the task.”

To learn more about Village Exchange International, contact Andrea Prince by email at andrea@villageexchangeinternational.org, or visit the website at http://www.villageexchangeinternational.org.

John Wodarski Receives Until There’s a Cure Foundation Grant for Work in the U.S. Virgin Islands

This past fall Dr. John Wodarski was awarded a $10,000 grant from the Until There’s A Cure Foundation to strengthen the social health network of the United States Virgin Islands (USVI).
In a joint effort the University of Tennessee College of Social Work (UTCSW), Children's Mental Health Services Research Center, Virgin Islands Division of Mental Health, Alcoholism, and Drug Dependency Services (DMHADDS), and the Untilt There's A Cure Foundation will be teaming up to provide HIV-testing, education, and counseling programs to the youth of the U.S. Virgin Islands. “The need for HIV prevention programming and testing in the U.S. Virgin Islands is tremendous. With an HIV prevalence of 1.6%, the incidences of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean region is the second highest in the world, second only to the sub-Saharan Africa,” says Dr. Wodarski. “We are proud to have the opportunity to use this generous grant provided by the Untilt There's A Cure Foundation in order to realize our efforts.”

The Untilt There's A Cure Foundation is a unique, non-profit organization that was founded in 1993 by two California mothers concerned about the effects of HIV/AIDS on the lives of their children. Since its inception, the organization has been committed to reaching out to the community by funding innovative programs that promote AIDS awareness and prevention education for young Americans, providing financial support for care and services for those living with AIDS, and actively supporting AIDS vaccine development, which offers the best hope for reducing the spread of HIV.

Dr. Wodarski's project, the HIV/AIDS Primary Prevention Program for Caribbean Adolescents (the Prevention Program), will consist of a HIV-testing, education, and counseling program designed to reduce high-risk HIV-related behaviors among infected youth (ages 14–19) in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The program capitalizes on an existing relationship between the Virgin Islands’ Division of Mental Health, Alcoholism and Drug Dependency Services (DMHADDS) and the faculty resources of the Children’s Mental Health Services Research Center within the UT College of Social Work to deliver an evidence-based program of culturally specific HIV interventions to the youth of the USVI who increasingly make up larger proportions of HIV/AIDS cases each year.

The hope is to prevent transmission of the virus by identifying HIV-positive youth, intensifying outreach efforts within existing DMHADDS programs, subsequent testing, education and counseling programs that focus on transmission prevention, and healthcare referral.

According to Dr. Wodarski, the Prevention Program is focused on identifying and enabling youth awareness and self-efficacy with a goal of gradually decreasing the number of unknown incidental transmissions. “HIV incidences have continued to increase, and for the third year in a row the USVI leads the nation with the highest number of confirmed HIV cases at 272.7 per 100,000 U.S. citizens. What is most alarming is that youth are accounting for larger proportions of cases each year.” Therefore, the Prevention Program will seek to identify HIV-positive youth through outreach and subsequent testing and increase the availability of integrated substance abuse and early intervention counseling services through a culturally specific HIV education program with referral to healthcare options within the USVI Department of Health.

The specific program goal is to strengthen an existing community-based collaboration to improve the health and HIV/AIDS transmission risk status of the target population. The proposed budget is intended to provide the resources needed to enable the USVI Health Department to develop infrastructure and program operations appropriate to address the HIV/AIDS problems in the territory by:

1. Increasing, through voluntary testing and counseling, the proportion of HIV-infected youth who know they are infected.
2. Decreasing the number of youth (ages 14–19) at high risk for transmission through an empirically-based, culturally-specific HIV education and counseling program.
3. Increasing the proportion of HIV-infected youth who are linked to appropriate transmission prevention, counseling, education, and treatment services.

As a recipient of Untilt There's a Cure Foundation funding, the CSW participates in the sale of the AIDS Awareness Bracelet designed by Isabella Giorgi; a gift of the Untilt There's A Cure Foundation. The striking bracelet, a beautiful symbol of awareness and remembrance, comes in several metals in three sizes. The organization also offers several other styles of bracelets, including a new ID bracelet with cord, an African art bracelet,
Theora Evans Honored as APHA Social Worker of the Year and Social Work Section Chair

When Theora Evans, PhD, MPH, MSW, talks about public health, she speaks with passion. When she teaches social workers about public health, she expresses a vision. “Imagine 12 clients who seek service within days of one another at a mental health clinic where you are practicing,” she says to a class of aspiring social workers. “Each client is exhibiting signs of depression. Each is currently unemployed. What is your responsibility as the professional service provider when faced with this scenario?” When Evans teaches she seeks to awaken in her students both individual response to clients and broad, community-based response.

Intervening in the individual lives of clients with depression is only one narrow approach to a problem. It is normative for one to experience depression as a result of the loss of employment. But when a community is experiencing massive job losses, a systemic intervention may also be appropriate. Social workers have historically been the ones to see a wider set of solutions that includes advocacy and structural societal change.

History reveals that public health and social work evolved simultaneously in the United States. Their emergence was a reaction to unbridled abject poverty and quality of life issues that arose at the end of the 19th century. Both were concerned with social reform and social justice as well as the special needs of mothers and children and the interrelated problems of child health, dependency, delinquency, and child labor. Social work, nursing, and pediatrics were among the first professions to develop public health advocacy and interdisciplinary practice. Currently, each of the aforementioned professions serve populations nationally and internationally without regard for socioeconomic status.

This vision and a lifelong commitment to service and social reform and social justice as well as the special needs of mothers and children and the interrelated problems of child health, dependency, delinquency, and child labor. Social work, nursing, and pediatrics were among the first professions to develop public health advocacy and interdisciplinary practice. Currently, each of the aforementioned professions serve populations nationally and internationally without regard for socioeconomic status. Evans looks forward to leading the Social Work Section. Her goal is to attract the brightest and best young professionals to take ownership of and shape its future within the association. In addition, she hopes to form relationships with members from other disciplines, celebrating the richness of trans-disciplinary practice while sharing the knowledge, research, and skills of various areas of public health.

Theora Evans has worked in the field of public health social work since early in her career. She was introduced to advocacy/preventative interventions while serving as Children and Adolescents program administrator for a comprehensive community mental health center in an extremely impoverished catchment area in Chicago. Later she launched the Illinois Maternal and Child Health Bureau, focusing on the passage of legislation to expand Medicaid coverage to newly diagnosed pregnant mothers while advocating for additional funding of other related health policies. Her transition to higher education was motivated by the desire to help shape the minds of practitioners with a view to understanding the balance of client empowerment and community practice.

In the coming year, Theora Evans will also assume the position of chair of the Social Work Section of the APHA. The organization is made up of 25 sections, some of which are practice based while others are research areas. Social workers can be found in virtually every section of the larger organization.

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