

## Area of Emphasis Scholars

# IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

## 2023-2024 Year in Review

Welcome to the 2023-2024 AEIR newsletter! This year, we welcomed seven new scholars and had two returning scholars. It has been an incredible year working alongside this group of AEIR Scholars. This year, the scholars developed and piloted a mentoring program based on recommendations from a research study conducted by last year's AEIR cohort on understanding the experiences of immigrant, refugee, and BIPOC students in the MSW program. We launched the program in January 2024, and seven current AEIR Scholars were matched with AEIR Alumni. We also had the incredible honor of collaborating with Dr. Neerja Singh (Adjunct Faculty) on her Bush Fellowship to develop a culturally responsive and equity-focused clinical supervision framework for AEIR and BIPOC St. Thomas MSW Alumni who are working towards their LICSW licensure. We are so grateful to Dr. Singh for choosing us to partner with them and her commitment to seeing our students succeed beyond graduation.

We closed out the end of the academic year with the annual AEIR Year-End Celebration. We invited incoming Scholars and AEIR Alumni as a way to build community and learn from one another. We also celebrated our two graduating scholars, Julie Joloka and Ted Tiffany.

*One of the AEIR Program's visions is to increase the capacity to support more students interested in practicing with immigrant and refugee communities. In addition, we would like to increase our outreach capacity to partner with agencies serving these communities. As we work towards expanding the AEIR Program, Bao Moua, Clinical Professor, joined as co-coordinator this academic year with Dr. Tonya Horn. Lastly, thanks to Edwin Buys for serving as the newsletter editor this year.*

*Tonya Horn*

*Bao Moua*



*Tonya Horn, MSW, PhD, LGSW  
Assistant Professor / AEIR Coordinator*



*Bao Moua, MSW, LICSW  
Clinical Professor / AEIR Coordinator*

# Class of 2024 GRADUATION

*“Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars.”*

- Norman Vincent Peale



The 2024 AEIR scholars would like to wish Julie Joloka and Ted Tiffany a big congratulations on graduating this year. We all know what level of work is required to be successful at the graduate level, so this is a massive accomplishment for both of you! We wish you nothing but the best as you continue into the next step of your life.



# Equity-Focused Clinical Supervision: Modeling the Interface of Policy, Practice & Advocacy

By Dr. Neerja Singh



Students who join the field of social work are motivated by their cardinal values of social justice and equity. It is important to co-create a paradigm of social work education where we engage in a dialogue with our students to create a process of learning based on unique and shared experiences and deeply grounded in a sense of curiosity to explore, create, challenge, and then recreate knowledge.

The current project we have designed and implemented at the School of Social is an attempt to inculcate a sense of curiosity among our students and faculty where we nurture their ability and willingness to transform their

lived experiences into knowledge and to use the knowledge they are acquiring in the school, as a process to create and recreate reality. We initiate this social justice-driven process by forming authentic relationships with our students from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities and are committed to engaging in critical and liberating dialogue to challenge the unjust social order. Utilizing the resources provided by Bush Foundation, Neerja Singh in collaboration with Tonya Horn and Bao Moua, has created an Equity-Focused Clinical Supervision for St. Thomas alumni working towards their independent license as Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LICSWs) in Minnesota. The supervision program is offered free of cost to the students and is designed with the following major goals:

- Inculcate a Genuine Curiosity to Bridge Theory & Practice: Paulo Freire says, "Curiosity about the object of knowledge and the willingness and openness to engage theoretical readings and discussions is fundamental. We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so would reduce the part to a pure verbalization or intellectualism. To negate theory for the sake of practice, as in the use of dialogue and conversation, is to risk losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice. For this reason, I never advocate either theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice. To achieve this unity, one must have an epistemological curiosity- a curiosity that is often missing in dialogue as conversation."

# Equity-Focused Clinical Supervision: Modeling the Interface of Policy, Practice & Advocacy

By Dr. Neerja Singh

The dominant construction of reality is controlled by the Western Colonial framework, which the social workers challenge. Our academic environment needs to be reflective of this cardinal value of challenging social injustice, and to do that, we have to break the artificial silos created in the field in the form of "policy" vs. "practice." The students in the equity-focused supervision model are encouraged to explore the oppressive policy framework that dehumanizes the clients they serve in their clinical practice and then challenge the policy through advocacy efforts. The students are encouraged to collaborate with their clients and co-create the desired transformation in the system.

- **Incorporate Social Determinants of Health in Clinical Practice:** With the increasing awareness of social determinants (drivers) of health and their relevance to social work practice, our students are learning to incorporate the identification of social determinants of health right when conducting assessments. We acknowledge that the clinical model in behavioral health treatment can only be successful if social determinants are addressed in our treatment plan. Social workers are committed to addressing our society's wide health disparities and inequities. For clinicians to effectively treat clinical disorders, it is important that the social determinants of health affecting our clients' lives are acknowledged and addressed. It is imperative that our clients have resources and support to transfer the gains they make in clinical settings to their daily lives. Our students are challenged to identify the specific policies that inhibit their abilities to facilitate their clients' access to socio-economic resources and then advocate to challenge and change the oppressive systems.
- **Self-Compassion in Social Work Profession:** The task of leading the process of liberation can be draining. The pursuit of social justice for historically marginalized communities can seem lonely and exhausting. Our supervision program has integrated the aspects of care and compassion for self as the foundation upon which our students will build their professional lives. The students challenge their mental models during the course of supervision, develop an appreciation for the feeling of "discomfort," and learn to differentiate it from feeling "unsafe."

We are excited to continue this journey with our students. We hope to co-create a nurturing environment for our students to identify their creative power and pursue the process of invention and re-invention of knowledge!

## Mentorship Program Reflection

*By John Lee*

I wanted to write about my experience with the Area of Emphasis in Practice with Immigrants and Refugees (AEIR) mentorship program as we celebrate the first year of its inception. I am the first in my family to immigrate to the U.S. and to graduate from graduate school. As part of the AEIR scholar requirement, I completed research on graduate-level mentorship programs this past semester. I hope to share something unique about my experience with you today.



I found many small successes from my participation in the mentorship program. All our AEIR scholars were paired with AEIR alumni in the same social work program and had

much insight and knowledge to share. We all had some very productive conversations with our respective mentors. They assist in ways only mentors can; they walk the same paths as before us and understand what we are going through. They also give us a general idea of what life will be like after graduation.

From hindsight, the conversations I had with my mentor have been tremendously helpful to me. During the few meetings we had, my mentor and I discussed our career goals, current struggles, aspirations, hopes, and dreams. We reiterate our passion for social work, address our fears, and give each other rapport and words of encouragement. I felt like I just met up with a long-lost friend and used the little time we had together to catch up. The discussions we had assisted me in making crucial decisions, such as which tracks to take and which career option to pick while considering my clinical options. It also allows me to experience in person the quality of the school we attended and see for myself the impact it has on its graduates, the professionalism we developed through the thoughtful lecture contents, and the high standards we hold ourselves to through the examples set for us. A good school reputation does not happen overnight; it takes good leadership and commitment from many dedicated staff and the actions of every person who graduated from this school and contributed to its success. They represent the school through how they contribute to the social work profession and how they treat other human beings in general. My interactions with our graduates have been awesome. I am extremely impressed with the mentorship program, specifically our St Thomas School of Social Work graduates.

## Strength and Growth

By Edwin Buys



It's been six years since I moved to the United States. I could have never pictured then that I would be here today, pursuing an MSW at the University of St. Thomas, a member and newsletter editor of the AEIR program. I was on a completely different path before I came here, following in my family's business, feeling trapped on a train that was curated by other people for other people. I would have never predicted in a thousand guesses that I would have pursued a degree in psychology and then found social work. I felt like I finally found my path--with a lens of inclusivity of marginalized communities, cultural recognition, and a place of empowering clients instead of labeling and scrutinizing them.

The MSW program at St. Thomas and the AEIR program has given me opportunities to be in the field and directly interact with immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in a meaningful and impactful way to help try and be a positive influence in their lives and well-being.

My placement at the University of St. Thomas Interprofessional Center has given me the opportunity to help people find legal resources, and psychiatric resources in addition to the counseling services provided by the foundational and clinical social work interns. It was my first taste of a world that was so close, yet so far, to the path I had originally started on.

Being a social worker requires two significant things to survive: strength and growth.

My foundational internship has shown me where my strengths lie and has given me the opportunity for growth that I may not have had in other places. I am thankful for the year I've spent already with St. Thomas at the IPC, and I look forward to more opportunities for growth and finding new strength for the heartache and recognition of the perseverance of the human spirit that this line of work can provide.

# My Aspirations and Objectives in Life

By Robin Chacko

I am excited about the Master of Social Work (MSW) degree program at the University of St. Thomas because I believe that it will help me to acquire advanced knowledge and skills that are necessary to broaden my vision and sharpen my abilities as a leader of the many social work ventures that I intend to undertake for the well-being of the people I serve. For instance, my religious superiors and I have been discussing the possibilities of expanding our educational and healthcare services to the people of Punjab. My career goals also include researching the developmental needs of the marginalized and less privileged groups in society, which might lead to creating social and educational programs for their development within the context of my religious order.



For me, social work is a profession that helps people overcome some of life's most difficult challenges, such as poverty, discrimination, abuse, addiction, physical illness, divorce, loss, unemployment, educational problems, disability, and mental illness. They help prevent crises and counsel individuals, families, groups, and communities to cope more effectively with everyday life's stresses and problems. I am interested in acquiring higher-level skills in building organizational effectiveness, enhancing community participation, fundraising, budgeting, handling governance issues, and running effective, mission-driven organizations. Focusing on strategic management and complying with relevant regulations and external reporting requirements will help me develop the skills I need to serve as an executive in small and large organizations. Furthermore, I hope to use the opportunities available through the degree program to combine knowledge gained in the classroom with real-world experiences of organizations across the private, public, and non-profit sectors.

As an ordained priest, I have been working in the remote villages of Punjab (India) since 2016. The town where I first worked is called Muduki. People in this village were impoverished, and no schools existed there. I faced challenges that tested my faith, perseverance, and commitment. My superiors asked me to find ways to develop opportunities for the people entrusted to my care, which prompted me to explore the possibility of establishing a school.

## My Aspirations and Objectives in Life (CONTINUED)

*By Robin Chacko*

I endured all hardships and strived to bring education to this village by starting a school that took work, from obtaining the land, constructing the school building, and gathering children to learn. There were many hurdles and obstacles from the people concerned, but I followed the procedure without giving a bribe, working with the authorities with hospitality, gentleness, and cordial relationships. Furthermore, I came across youth who needed guidance and the right direction in other places. I found joy in motivating them toward a better life and higher studies.

I volunteered in Nepal during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 for six months. It was an eye-opening experience for me, and I noticed the pathetic situation of poor people struggling to meet the end of the day. I was dutiful in coordinating, collaborating, and mobilizing resources and making the requirements available to the remote villages of Nepal in association with Nepal's Little Flower Society.

India's caste system had several problems that affected women in society, including deliberate issues at the community level, rising economic inequality, hunger, and many more challenges. This led to the rise of social work professionals who fought to improve life at the community level. The fundamental aim of my study is to promote or restore an equivalent significant interaction among individuals and society to improve the quality of life for everyone. The situation of young girls and children in the remotest villages is very disappointing as they face challenges, gender discrimination, and the inability to pursue their goals due to poverty. Healthcare is also a huge problem. There are no quality hospitals. If people become ill, they must go to the city to see a doctor. Education is a massive problem. There are no quality schools and colleges, and the market is also a significant village problem. Poverty, unemployment, transportation problems, lack of awareness of government policies, superstition, poor infrastructure, and many other important issues exist. But still, people live happily and healthily compared to city people. The above-mentioned are the groups with whom I had different types of experiences in my life. All the same, I believe that having gained more knowledge through my studies in social welfare and administration, I would be able to enhance their lives and enable them to become self-reliant.

## The Urban Village

By Mar Htay and Gina Gresham



When you walk into the Urban Village, located on the corner of Arcade Street and Magnolia Avenue East in St. Paul, the first thing that catches your eye is the art covering each wall. A mural painted by Mu Ku, Eh So Dwe, and Oh Meh depicting a tropical village spans the longest wall, slowly feeding into a shining city and ending in a grove of palm trees where once there had been a hole in the wall from a runaway car. The building, previously a rundown bar, now radiates with Karen and Karenni pride, with paintings by artists in the Karen community and traditional Karen dress and instruments filling the remaining wall space. "It represents who we are and what we do," shares a student from Roseville

High School. It's her second year coming to the Urban Village, which itself is only in its second year of operation, and already the amount of youth involved has quadrupled. The Urban Village is a non-profit organization founded by Jesse Phenow in 2019. Its mission is to "accompany continuing generations of Karen and Karenni youth as they connect, heal, and launch." At its core, the Urban Village is dedicated to nurturing the Karen and Karenni youth by providing a space for cultural exchange, educational enrichment, and mutual support. They offer academic tutoring, career development workshops, mental health support, and cultural identity exploration. These initiatives are tailored to help guide youth, young adults, and families, encouraging them to achieve their full potential while maintaining a deep connection to their cultural roots.



One of the students from the Tuesday tutoring group shared her journey from feeling like an outsider to finding a sense of belonging at the Urban Village. "Words to describe [the Urban Village]: home, safe, it brings value, 'you being you' you don't have to be afraid of who you are as a person," says a student, encapsulating the essence of the Urban Village as a sanctuary where individuals are free to express their true selves without fear of judgment.

## The Urban Village (Continued)

By Mar Htay and Gina Gresham



The Urban Village excels in promoting cultural pride and community bonding. Engaging activities and educational programs enable students to explore their Karen heritage and learn about diverse cultures. "Bonding activities, having fun with your friends, learning new things, learning about Karen identity," one student mentions, illustrating the enriching cultural experiences at the Urban Village. Students and staff dream of a future where community bonds strengthen and school clubs collaborate more closely. They envision a space where judgment is left at the door, replaced by acceptance, support, and mutual growth. The Urban Village is more than a place; it's a home, a sanctuary, and a launchpad for future leaders who carry the

essence of their culture into the wider world with pride.

The Klub at the Urban Village offers many educational supports, including tutoring on Tuesdays focused on crucial academic and life skills such as scholarship applications, FAFSA completion, resume building, and leadership opportunities. These programs are tailored approach that meets students' specific needs and aspirations.

The Urban Village, according to Ms. Miller, is distinguished by its embodiment of Karen values, such as trust and community support. The Urban Village is "unlike any other place I've been; the community values stick out in Karen values." In Karen culture, "I will trust you until I know I shouldn't," she states, highlighting the openness and willingness of the Karen community to engage and support one another.

Through the leadership and dedication efforts of the Urban Village team, the programs not only offer a pathway to academic and personal success for Karen and Karenni youth but also stand as a testament to the power of community support, cultural pride, and collective growth. As the Urban Village continues to evolve, its impact on the lives of Karen and Karenni youth promises to resonate for generations.

[www.theurbanvillage.org](http://www.theurbanvillage.org)

## "Who am I"

By Abigail Mancilla



I am Abby. I am Abigail Martha. I am a Kraus. I am an Anderson. I am more recently a Mancilla. My name means happy father, and it certainly rings true.

I come from strong women: Dewina, Janel, Martha, Maria, Kathryn, and Dolores. I come from lots of cousins and raucous gatherings. I come from nurturers and pull yourself up by the bootstraps. I come from hard workers and long winters. I come from farmers, loggers, and teachers. I come from doing it myself, buying used cars, and saving for a rainy day. I come from cheese eaters and cheese makers. I come from brats on the grill and a beer in your hand. I come from hardy cooking with lots of potatoes. I come from endless fields and birch trees

and the Mississippi River bluffs. I come from the smell of sawdust and marigolds and tomato vines. I come from dogs and chickens and bare feet. I come from tiptoeing on cold floors and asking Dad to put more wood on the fire. I come from jumping in puddles and swimming in the pond. I come from kickball, baseball, and, most importantly, the Green Bay Packers. I come from card playing: sheephead, spoons, and Phase10. I come from musicians, artists, and singers. I come from the living room dancing to Crocodile Rock and Johnny Cash's number one hit. I come from humility and respectfulness. I come from kindness and hospitality. I come from the midwesterners, yearning to see the world. I come from learning to have an open mind.

I come from the people who I love most of all.



# Traudt Family Scholarship Impact

*By John Lee*

It has been a year since I started receiving a scholarship from the Traudt Family to help with my tuition at St Thomas for my graduate social work studies. I still feel flabbergasted that I am receiving a scholarship that can help cover my tuition. It is the main reason that I can be in school. I was the only parent working in my family with two young children at home when I started school. The current society makes it so hard for families with children to survive. We can have two incomes living in Central Minnesota, but the additional income will be spent to cover the high childcare expenses. Currently working as a county financial worker, part of my job is to help many families obtain childcare assistance. I know from working with the program that the assistance is insufficient to meet the needs of struggling families. The alternative is a one-parent income household. Our family can barely cover all our housing expenses and other essentials, graduate school tuition would be out of the question. Your financial support is critical in allowing me to graduate at St. Thomas and become a clinical therapist.

After a year of schooling, I am much more informed about the structural imbalance of our society, and I found myself with many more reasons to speak up and advocate for my clients at work and for the underserved and disadvantaged population in general. My work as a social worker improves as I am more grounded in my thinking and have more confidence as I advocate for my clients. I share my knowledge and newly gained perspective with my colleagues as I engage in all the additional learning through the many hours of schoolwork I put in during this past year. Thanks to the vigorous curriculum and the wonderful faculties here at St. Thomas, I am much more knowledgeable about social issues in general. I can easily differentiate myself from others who may not be familiar with these social issues or have much experience or perspective to understand or to provide a solution. I am fortunate to have gained both through school and my work, and now I feel even more prepared to tackle these issues as I prepare for my internship and clinical during the next two years.

So, thank you for supporting students like me. I couldn't have done it without your financial support.

## Interprofessional Center for Counseling and Legal Services

By Amy Smith



At the close of 2023, there were 114 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide due to persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations. This number marks the largest ever single-year increase in forced displacement. Some of these individuals now call the Twin Cities their home. We at the Interprofessional Center for Counseling and Law (IPC) are honored to be part of their journey as we provide supportive social work services to a number of these new neighbors. Many of our clients have experienced some type of significant trauma either in their home country, while in transit to safety to the US, or after arriving here in the US.

Some have had traumatic experiences in all three of these stages.

Our students in the AEIR have been intensively practicing their social work skills by helping these clients achieve a greater sense of safety and well-being in their new community. Our clinical-level MSW students have provided therapeutic interventions to help address the mental health, traumatic stress, and adjustment issues of our clients. Our foundation MSW students have provided a wide range of clinical case management services to help clients access vital resources, navigate complicated systems, including the immigration system, and promote social connectedness to strengthen clients' sense of safety and adjustment.

Sometimes, it is the simplest of things that promote healing. One of our social work students worked tirelessly to help an asylum seeker client living in a remote suburb get approval for SNAP benefits and then figure out a complicated bus route to a grocery store. After finally being able to cook for herself—a traditional dish from her home country—the client reported, “I finally feel like myself again.”

In addition to engaging in creative social work interventions, our students collaborate with other professionals, including psychology, law, and outside health care providers, to engage in best practice care and foster the whole person's health of our clients. It is a privilege to support our immigrant neighbors on their journey to reestablish their lives here in the US and witness how they ultimately enrich their new communities with their resiliency, unique experiences, and talents.

## AEIR Impact

By Lah Tha Pwee

I am a refugee from Thailand who arrived in the United States in 2008 with my two parents. I was eleven years old when I arrived in the United States, and with the minimal resources available to us, we had to rely on ourselves to thrive and navigate the system without much help. Because of my experience, I want to work and help my community members to ensure that they have appropriate resources and do not have to worry all the time. I'd like to thank my mother for demonstrating the impact that an advocate can have on the lives of those in our community. My mother was a women's rights activist, human rights advocate, and midwife. She inspired me to pursue higher education and follow the path of an advocate. My mother never obtained an education beyond fourth grade, yet she is quite vocal about human rights. My objective is to become an advocate for those who are unable to express themselves due to a variety of circumstances in their lives.



The AEIR program had a significant impact on my MSW program journey. Applying to the MSW program was nerve-racking because my oral and written English skills were lacking. However, my advisors, Tonya and Bao, who oversee the AEIR program, have been incredibly helpful and encouraged me to speak out and be available anytime I need help. They provided many resources to assist me in completing the MSW program and numerous opportunities to enhance myself and my academic pursuits. I would be lost without the program and the assistance of the two staff members.

I am the breadwinner in my household. My family relies on me for everything, so I work full time, am a full-time mother, and attend the University of St. Thomas part-time. The Traudt scholarship helped me with my financial burden because I had previously had to work two jobs to provide for myself and my family. Because of the Traudt scholar's support, I was able to give up one of my part-time jobs, allowing me to devote more time to my education.