



# Reaching Others

Perhaps more than in any profession, social workers are able by touching one life to improve the lives of many; by empowering one person, to change the lives of families and neighbors; by empowering one group, to send change rippling through neighborhoods, organizations, communities, and nations.

In 2009, the School of Social Work graduated 181 professional MSWs and three PhDs in social welfare, all committed to making a difference.

*What follows are the stories of three new MSWs who represent the best of who we are as a school and a profession.*

## OLDER AND WISER

PETER FIRESTONE, BA/MSW

**S**TRAIGHT OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL, Peter Firestone spent six years working with youth in community centers and schools in several South Side and West Side neighborhoods of Chicago. Realizing there was a limit to what he could do in the world of human services with a high school degree, he decided to return to his native Buffalo and go back to school.

“My interest was how to make organizations work better, how to make projects serve people better,” he says.

Firestone enrolled in the BA/MSW program at UB. In the MSW program he started working with an aging population.

“At first you want to say that you know what you want to do,” he says, “but there is wisdom in the school’s plan to fill in the gaps of your experience. You become more well-rounded.”

Indeed, he found a new calling through an internship at the nearby Weinberg Campus, a senior living community with a pioneering aging-in-place program that aims to keep frail older people living independently in the community.

Firestone pursued this interest in an advanced-year field placement that was part of the school’s Hartford Partnership Program in Aging Education, a field education model that rotates students through different parts of a single program or agency so they gain a rich perspective of the full spectrum of aging and of the diverse services that older adults and their caregivers need.

“It is a comprehensive program for building competency in all disciplines for geriatric work,” he says, “giving you opportunities to interact with hospice, hospitals, senior centers, and the VA, and talking about dementia, end-of-life care, policy, substance abuse, veterans’ issues, and any issue that intersects with aging.”

Attention to the individual is the primary focus. “We assume older people have all these problems instead of looking for their strengths,” Firestone says. “There’s a catch phrase in social work that people are experts on their own problems. They know what they’re going through. They know what they’ve tried. They know what’s failed. So it’s really about honoring the person’s individuality and strengths and

helping them to pull those things out. Listening is huge. And being there as one who’s willing to advocate—because a lot of times seniors are just shuffled around.”

An example of this occurred during Firestone’s fieldwork when it became apparent that a client was being placed into a completely inappropriate level of care.

“**A** WOMAN WHO CAME INTO A NURSING FACILITY for rehabilitation after a fall wanted to go home,” Firestone recounts. “But someone decided that she was confused and belonged in a dementia unit. She was justifiably disoriented because she had been shuffled from a hospital to rehab to a dementia bed in the course of just a few days, with little or no explanation. After sitting with her and actually taking the time to evaluate her situation, we saw this was the source of her agitation and confusion. This woman was a refugee who fled from the Nazis in World War II—can you imagine why she was now concerned about being held hostage?”

Firestone is committed to the Buffalo area and to finding a position in the new order of aging care.

Firestone says that his UB experience prepared him well for the road ahead. “The School of Social Work program challenged who I am as a professional and helped me grow in that regard,” he says. “You come out of it with a certain confidence. When you’re first starting out in social work, you have this idea that there’s a

formula for helping people or communities, some magic piece of knowledge. What you really learn is that while you approach everything with a theoretical framework, people and communities are dynamic, and the problems they face are dynamic, so you have to be creative about helping to solve those problems. You can’t just rely on what you think may work, or even what has worked somewhere else.

“The joy in the work is finding the way to help people. I came away with an understanding of systems and issues that I wouldn’t have necessarily pursued on my own.”

—J.B.



PETER FIRESTONE

## HONOR THE STORY

RICHARD CONHEADY, MSW

**S**OME STUDENTS ENTER MSW study directly from college. Many come with a few years of ground-level experience in social services, sure now of their career choice; some come to change careers.

Richard Conheady came with 15 years of progressively more challenging social services experience.

He answered the call of social conscience in 1991 and has worked with people in need ever since. His MSW studies confirmed what he'd learned along the way and equipped him with new skills.

Conheady started his social service career with a church-based outreach to ex-offenders, first managing a restaurant that was part of a work reorientation program for recently released offenders, then leading counseling groups in correctional facilities and eventually running a residential services facility for released offenders. He'd been an ornamental horticulturalist for 10 years when joining Rochester's socially active Corpus Christi Church set him on a different road.

After seven years of learning on the job, he decided he needed a degree—"I thought I'd better get some education." He knew there would be too many doors closed to him without one. So he enrolled at SUNY-Brockport, graduating four years later with a BSW. He added another stop in his professional development with a field placement with the Spiritus Christi Mental Health Center.

Newly credentialed, he went to work for the Cayuga Home for Children in Monroe County, among other things helping the agency develop outcome measures for its functional family therapy program. He was eventually made program coordinator.

He enrolled in the MSW program when the clock was about to run out on his advance-standing option. (That he received an A- in an otherwise perfect academic record at UB indicates that he did still have something to learn!)

Actually, what Conheady wants to learn more about at this stage is narrative therapy, which he was introduced to

by a colleague early in his career and then practiced during his undergraduate fieldwork and again in his MSW field placement at St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center in Rochester. St. Joseph's provides comprehensive health care, counseling, adult education and social work services for individuals and families who lack access to health insurance.

Because the center serves the uninsured, it doesn't have to march to any insurer's tempo and so it is free to use a poststructuralist practice such as narrative therapy that is too new to have the kind of replicated outcome studies that payers need to see.

**F**OR CONHEADY, whose social work career has been the realization of the vocation he found in himself, there is a natural appeal in a therapeutic model founded on helping clients develop the "story" of their skills and abilities. As in other models, the therapist recognizes that the client is the expert in his or her life. Unlike solution-focused therapies that are organized by problem, narrative therapy seeks to discover the story line the client can use to solve problems.

Ironically, the MSW program taught him models he knows he doesn't want to use. And it formalized and sharpened his critical thinking. So now he can develop his skills in a nonstructuralist approach to therapy, knowing where it fits in the universe of available therapies, and confident in his reasons for preferring it.

Moreover, he'd like to contribute to the body of understanding about narrative therapy by using an evaluation process to measure its effectiveness.

As he surveys the available opportunities at the point of resuming his career, Richard Conheady says he will continue to work with underserved populations; he'd like to combine working for a nonprofit agency with private practice. And maybe teach. "I'd love to develop a course around nonstructuralist therapy."

Since past performance is a good predictor of future performance, that's a course you may find in the Rochester area someday soon.

—J.M.



RICHARD CONHEADY

## DOUBLY ARMED

MANDY TEETER, MSW/MBA

**H**OW MANY PLATES CAN ONE PERSON SPIN SUCCESSFULLY? More than you'd guess, if that person is Mandy Teeter. Teeter is a mother, wife and an accredited addictions therapist living and working just outside Rochester, N.Y. As of this May, she is also the first to graduate from the School of Social Work with a combined MSW/MBA degree.

"It's been wonderful—rather tough and challenging at times—but rewarding," Teeter says of the dual degree. While she worked part-time in Rochester as an alcohol and substance abuse counselor, she commuted daily to her full-time graduate school programs in Buffalo.

The MSW/MBA is a three-year program. Taken separately, the degrees would require four years to complete. Credit hours are split between the two schools, with two joint internships.

Teeter always planned to go to graduate school after earning her undergraduate degree, but chose to work for a few years until she knew exactly what she wanted to study—and why. She eventually began researching schools with interdisciplinary and combined programs in social work and business.

"I knew the MSW would give me the clinical side," she says, "and a foundation in evidence-based research. But I also realized that an MBA could give me useful exposure to business and management principles." UB was the only school in New York offering the combination, and since it was only an hour away, she decided to take the plunge and apply.

Teeter says that in the addictions field, the focus tends to be on the individual. She wanted to look holistically at intervention programs that are more collaborative and better suited to her goal of becoming a social services administrator in the nonprofit or local government sector.

"Ideally, I see myself at the administrative level, working on transforming systems of care and services delivery," Teeter says. She'd like to consult on evaluation data for a health department or nonprofit serving a regional population. "I've learned that you can't really improve health care services until you've collected all the data."



MANDY TEETER

Teeter's two internships were (MBA) at the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill in Rochester, where she researched Medicaid policy and reimbursements; and (MSW) at the Monroe County Office of Mental Health, where she worked on developing assessment tools and an integrated care plan for a Rochester-based mental health and chemical dependency services provider. In both internships, Teeter collected and organized health data to make it more accessible and useful for each agency.

Howard J. Doueck, professor and associate dean for academic affairs, served as Teeter's advisor during the three-year program, and helped her pioneer the dual degree, along with Diane E. Elze, associate professor and director of the MSW program, and Kathleen Kost, former associate dean for academic affairs. They charted which courses were available and when, and pointed Teeter to the people with the answers for scheduling courses and internships.

**T**EETER SPENT THE FIRST SEMESTER adjusting to the quantitative courses in management and getting a general feel for the vocabulary and culture of business school. "It was like a different world from behavioral health, with its own language," she says.

By her third year, having both social work and management courses under her belt, Teeter was comfortable, and began to fully appreciate how each degree informed the other.

"We often see people with clinical—but not financial or managerial—backgrounds running nonprofit agencies, and it may not always be a good fit. If you have a background in both management and social work, you're prepared for the variety of responsibilities that leadership at that level must deal with," Doueck says.

Teeter is looking at Rochester-area nonprofits to see which ones fit her unique skill sets. The plates are still spinning and she feels empowered to keep them going.

—L.N.M.