A RECOVERING WORLD

Social workers are making an impact on a world that is healing physically, emotionally, and systemically.

WHERE SOCIAL WORK AND THE LAW INTERSECT

Naelys Luna is dean of a college that brings two vital professions together

COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS AND COVID-19 RECOVERY

Rahbel Rahman highlights an overlooked profession

WHEN OUR HEROES LOOK TO US FOR HELP

For Kara Byron, this needs assessment hit close to home
When Our Heroes Look to Us for Help

Kara Byron, GSS '19, knew she’d have to perform a needs assessment as a social worker. She didn’t expect to perform one on her hero.

Features

Community Health Workers and COVID-19 Recovery
Assistant Professor Rahbel Rahman, Ph.D., made it her mission to highlight community health workers’ importance.

Where Social Work and the Law Intersect
Naelys Luna, GSS '01, '05, now serves as dean of FAU’s College of Social Work and Criminal Justice. How does she see social work and law enforcement collaborating?

Academia’s Storyteller: GSS Welcomes Newest Faculty Member
Jenn Lilly comes to Fordham with a desire to tell untold stories.
Social work has offered me the most flexible professional framework to infuse my unique vision and gifts to be a vehicle-of-compassion with the intentional destination of freedom, justice, equality, and well-being for humanity, the earth, and all living beings.

— Tina Maschi, Ph.D., GSS Professor
Dear GSS Community,

This spring, we all find ourselves reflecting on a year unlike any other. We’ve faced the unimaginable challenges of a global pandemic and witnessed individuals and communities around the world take to the streets in support of racial and social equality.

At Fordham and GSS, how we connect, teach, learn, and work all changed in a flash. As the days turned from weeks to months, together, we developed new strategies, adopted new technologies, and found creative solutions to new challenges. I am incredibly proud of how our school and community responded to and thrived under the most difficult of circumstances.

Throughout the past year, our profession has been on the front lines supporting the most vulnerable among us and has stood in solidarity with others seeking racial justice and systemic change. The pursuit of justice for the marginalized has always set social workers apart from the other helping professions. At our profession’s core is the understanding that both person and environment are critical to the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. This year has been a powerful reminder of the inseparable relationship between environment and personal well-being.

As spring turns to summer, the gift of the coronavirus vaccines offers us a path out of isolation and back to more familiar movement about the world. Yet, we all sense that we are facing a “new normal.” On both an individual and societal level, we are reevaluating our priorities. We are understanding and attending to healing and recovery in new ways, and there is much work to be done.

As the dean of Fordham’s Graduate School of Social Service, I am honored to be a part of educating knowledgeable, compassionate, and skilled social work professionals. I’m especially proud that our students and alumni will continue to serve on the front lines as change-makers supporting justice and healing for both individuals and the systems and environments so critical to our well-being.

Thank you to all of you who continue to support GSS and our mission. For those who seek to help create positive, sustainable change in a recovering world, GSS welcomes you!

Debra M. McPhee, Ph.D.
Dean
Fordham University
Graduate School of Social Service
Community Health Workers and COVID-19 Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic recovery is looking up, but it’s far from over.

We must not forget how the virus crippled our communities and highlighted the health disparities and inequities already present within them. And while we continue to battle this deadly, contagious virus, community health is critical.

Enter community health workers (CHWs), experts in addressing the impacts of social determinants of health in community-based settings. They know how their communities live, grow, work, and play—and how all these things affect well-being. If we use their guidance, our community members will have the knowledge necessary to stay healthy.

The problem is, we haven’t used that guidance. We haven’t even given it a chance.

Think about it: Have you heard much about CHWs in the U.S. recovery plans? Did you know what CHWs were before this article?

If you answered “no” to either of those questions, Fordham GSS Assistant Professor Rahbel Rahman, Ph.D., wants to find out why.

COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS IN PAKISTAN
Rahman began her work with CHWs in her home country of Pakistan, where she worked in a hospital providing free services in a low-income area in which 2.5 million people lived within a 1-km radius.

The area’s industries attracted immigrants from all over the country in need of work. Residents received maternal and infant health care through Pakistan’s community health worker program known as the lady
health worker program, but the hospital’s leaders were quick to understand that more was needed. The hospital developed a community health worker program to raise awareness about tuberculosis, rabies, and other diseases rampant in the area, and to work for prevention.

This is where Rahman’s life changed. She worked with the CHWs, listened to their narratives about health and social care needs in the community, trained them, and set up a structure in which they would succeed.

“We [the hospital] realized there was a disconnect between what our research was asking and what the community needs were,” and health workers were “instrumental” in addressing this, she said.

“CHWs are members of the community they serve. They have the lived experience of the community members,” Rahman said.

ACROSS THE BRIDGE OF PRIVILEGE
Rahman grew up privileged, and she recognizes it.

Her home in Karachi, Pakistan, is situated in an affluent neighborhood, across a bridge from the hospital where she worked. Every day she’d sit in the back seat of her chauffeured car, accompanied by a security guard, and transition from one life into the next.

“It almost felt like as soon as I went to the hospital, I lost my identity,” she said. “These community health workers exposed me to what life was. I admit I was living in a bubble.”

Rahman went door-to-door with the workers, visiting households to understand firsthand the conditions in which people lived, and to learn the best practices for developing health promotion initiatives.

**“These community health workers exposed me to what life was. I admit I was living in a bubble.”**

– RAHBEL RAHMAN

Rahman added that for someone with her privilege, “a woman cannot walk on the streets of Karachi. These community health workers protected me. They were there. And I really tried to assimilate as best as I could into the community and understand the community needs, listen to their narratives, reflect on my privileges, and see where I could situate myself in relation to the community.”

Rahman said she was shocked by what she saw when she went for household visits.

“It was extreme poverty,” she said. “You do see poverty on the streets in Pakistan, but growing up seeing street children and beggars on the street almost results in a state of numbness. You don’t hear the narratives; you don’t go in their homes and feel what they’re feeling. The compassion and humility that I developed in this journey that CHWs took me on has been a lifelong experience for me.”
PAIRING EXPERIENCE WITH EDUCATION
Rahman cherished her time with the Pakistan community health workers, but she wanted to combine the experiential knowledge they gave her with a more scientific and technical skillset. So, once the hospital’s CHW program was set up and running smoothly, she applied for her postgraduate degree program.

Rahman then received a prestigious national scholarship that allowed her to pursue her M.S.W. and Ph.D. studies at Columbia University’s School of Social Work.

“The first thing I did when I came to Columbia University was contact professors who worked with community health workers,” she said.

Her time at Columbia put her in touch with her mentor, Rogério Meireles Pinto, who was interested in community health workers in Brazil at the time. Rahman wanted to know how CHWs were a part of family health teams in Brazil. Her publications stemmed from her dissertation, which focused on the ways in which CHWs work with physicians and nurses within interprofessional health care teams to offer integrated care.

Rahman traveled to Brazil and spoke with CHWs there. Her recent research—accepted for publication in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*—examines how patients evaluate CHWs’ ability to practice narrative medicine.

Currently, there is growing interest in teaching doctors and nurses how to better show empathy, compassion, and humility, and, “the reality is, CHWs do that,” Rahman said. “They listen to narratives, they process it—that’s what they do. Why are we not learning from them? What’s happening that we’re not catching? Why can’t we learn from them?”

MISUNDERSTANDING THE CHW ROLE
The answer to that question, Rahman said, is that CHWs are not doctors. Or nurses. Because they haven’t gone to medical school, they are sometimes not fully respected by those who did.

“Just like the physician/nurse power dynamic is a problem,” Rahman said, “the physician/CHW power dynamic is even worse.”

The truth is, CHWs know the people. They live beside them, and with them. In the U.S., CHWs help their neighbors by supplying them with what they need. This can be material objects, such as diapers and cribs, or other modes of assistance, such as helping people obtain mental health screenings, or identifying child abuse and domestic abuse in homes.

CHWs are advocates for the health needs of individuals, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. They assist community residents in effective communication with health care providers or social service agencies. Additionally, they act as liaisons or advocate and implement programs that promote, maintain, and improve individual and overall community health.

Despite all they do, CHWs aren’t well-integrated in the health care system. They aren’t listened to; they’re ignored, even in the face of a pandemic that has destroyed communities in droves.

Inadequate compensation is an ongoing issue for the position as well. Many CHWs are limited to uncertain, part-time schedules, and receive no benefits. This, coupled with the emotional toll they bear, can make it difficult to keep showing up for their communities.
ARRIVAL AT FORDHAM AND EXEMPLIFYING CHW IMPORTANCE

Rahman arrived at Fordham just three years ago, determined to exemplify the importance of community health workers. She realized through her research that, in the U.S., CHWs are trained in home visiting programs, but their roles don’t seem as well-defined as those whose job title was “home visitor.”

So, she teamed up with fellow GSS assistant professor Abby Ross, Ph.D., who conducted extensive research in the field of home visiting. Rahman and Ross conducted a survey consisting of 75 CHWs and 75 home visitors in New York. The goal was to understand individual and organizational-level predictors of job performance, well-being, and ability to deliver evidence-based services.

In the midst of their research, Rahman noticed a gap in the CHW conversation: managerial support.

Community health workers are expected to be supervised by either a registered nurse or a licensed master of social work. Rahman and Ross conducted focus groups with executive directors and managers overseeing these CHWs, and merged the results with the earlier survey data to highlight the importance of these positions during COVID-19 recovery. Her recent research, published in *Health Promotion International*, speaks to this.

“We tried to really exemplify the importance of CHWs,” Rahman said. “They do mental health screening; advocate for communities; screen for disease prevention; all in friendly, layman terms. Why are we not incorporating them in our COVID-19 plan? It seems crazy that there is so much focus from states and cities to engage communities, but we’re not engaging CHWs as frontline responders.”

She has also been exploring how race dynamics play a role with CHWs’ supervision.

“The majority of social workers are white women,” she said. “The next step is to explore the power dynamics of white women in supervisory roles over women of color.”

THE BRIDGE TO THE COMMUNITY

The symbolism is so strong it’s almost cliché: At the start of her career, Rahman had to literally cross a bridge into the community she served in order to advocate for local CHWs in Pakistan.

Doesn’t it make sense that CHWs are the metaphorical—but oh-so-vital—bridges into communities, wherever those communities may be?

But when budget cuts are made, Rahman said, CHWs are among the first to go. That’s why Rahman has made it her mission to spotlight these crucial, yet underappreciated, workers. They are the medical field’s connection to the community. They bridge the experiential gaps in our knowledge.

“[The COVID-19 pandemic has shown] the importance of community ownership,” Rahman said. “CHWs can help mobilize communities to take ownership of their own health issues.”

So, the narrative has to switch. Instead of wondering, How can we support CHWs in the medical field, we must ask, How can we not?

“The majority of social workers are white women. The next step is to explore the power dynamics of white women in supervisory roles over women of color.”

– RAHBEL RAHMAN
Where Social Work and the Law Intersect

For someone who has accomplished so much in her career, you’d think Naelys Luna, Ph.D., GSS ’01, ’05, might not remember the first class she took as an MSW student. However, when asked about her fondest memories as a student at Fordham GSS, she seemed to transform back into a budding social worker, sitting in the first row of her Social Work Practice with Individuals class.

“I loved it,” Luna said of the experience. “I loved every minute of being a student of social work.”

Since that first class, Luna has gone on to become a double alumna of GSS; a clinical social worker; a professor; a director; an interim dean; and most recently, founding dean of the newest college at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), the College of Social Work and Criminal Justice—which was founded on July 1, 2020, and which Luna played a major role in creating.

“I am very excited to lead FAU’s College of Social Work and Criminal Justice,” Luna said in a Jan. 6 release. “I look forward to working with an exceptional team who inspire and prepare tomorrow’s social work and criminal justice leaders, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to effect positive change in the world.”

A SPECIAL PROFESSORIAL RELATIONSHIP
When Luna thinks back to her time at GSS, one professor stands out—Cathy Berkman, Ph.D. Luna said it was Berkman who “recruited” her to Fordham.

“When I put a face to the school, it’s Cathy Berkman,” she said. “She became my inspiration, my friend, and my mentor for life.”

After the two met in one of Luna’s application interviews, Berkman mentioned a Fordham-funded grant opportunity for research focused
students interested in becoming researchers in mental health among Hispanics. In this role, she conducted research, published, and presented about Hispanic mental health alongside nationally and internationally recognized researchers.

In addition to her doctoral studies and research, Luna also worked as a licensed social worker in a holistic office. She built her private practice in partnership with a psychiatrist, psychologist, chiropractor, nutritionist, and physical therapist. Her dream of working as an independent social worker in clinical practice in Manhattan was realized.

She was also serving at Lehman College as an adjunct professor and a research project director. She coordinated a research study examining children of outpatients with dysthmic disorder, a form of chronic depression.

But this was just the beginning.

DOWN TO FLORIDA, UP THE LADDER
Doctorate in hand, Luna moved to Florida ready to make an impact. As a professor at FAU’s Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work (one-half of what is now the College of Social Work and Criminal Justice), Luna focused her research primarily on substance use disorders and treatment, mood disorders, and overall psychosocial functioning.

“I was testing the effectiveness and efficacy of interventions for individuals afflicted with addiction and/or mental disorder,” she said. “I wanted to see if we could tailor interventions for individuals with comorbid disorders.”

One day, she heard a knock on her office door. It was a fateful knock, one that would send this lifelong clinician, educator, and researcher into a different role. The social work school needed a director.

“They needed me to step up,” Luna said. “I never saw myself as an administrator; I was a researcher. But with the confidence and encouragement of my colleagues, I decided to give it a try.”

on Hispanic elders in New York City, examining their perceptions of mental health symptoms and exploring their help-seeking behaviors. As a Cuban American herself, Luna seized the opportunity with pride.

“That convinced me that Fordham was the right place,” Luna said. “Because there was a commitment toward minorities and diversity—and that was a key point for me.”

Following her very first semester at GSS, Luna was again approached by Berkman—this time with a different proposition. She wanted Luna to consider pursuing her Ph.D. at GSS as well.

“I remember looking at her as if she had three eyes and thinking, ‘What is she talking about?’” Luna said, laughing. “Forget about being a dean; being a doctoral student didn’t cross my mind until that conversation.”

Sure enough, Luna enrolled in the Ph.D. program. While earning her doctorate, she worked as a minority research fellow at the New York Psychiatric Institute at Columbia University. Luna’s doctoral studies were funded by a National Institute of Mental Health grant supporting minority fellow Naelys Luna, Ph.D.
For three years, Luna served as director of the school, learning new leadership skills and realizing the broadened impact she could have as an administrator. She also oversaw one of the largest financial gifts in FAU history at the time, a $7 million gift from the Sandler family to name the school.

“[The position] really redefined what I was doing,” she said. “I felt that I was making a difference in people’s lives in different ways.”

The impact she made was tangible, and people took notice. On July 1, 2019, there was another knock at the door. This time, Luna was asked if she would like to serve as interim dean.

A SCHOOL’S FORMATION
As interim dean, Luna brought vision and clarity to the school’s strategy.

“We needed to have difficult conversations about who we were as a college,” she said. “Did we want to reimagine who we were and what we were doing?”

The reimagining process came to fruition this past July, in the formation of the College of Social Work and Criminal Justice—with Luna as its founding dean.

Comprising the Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work and the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, it offers one doctoral, two master’s, and two undergraduate degree programs; specialization certificate programs in child welfare, healthy aging, and addiction; and four postgraduate certificate programs, including paralegal, legal nurse consultant, dialectical behavioral therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy programs.

“I’m very optimistic about what this college is going to offer,” Luna said, “particularly after what we experienced last year in this country with police brutality, violence, and social injustice—this college is more important than ever.”

MARRYING TWO VITAL PROFESSIONS
As a nation, we were awakened by the events of 2020. We faced disease, death, and extreme polarization. Many have formed opinions on the current structures and systems within our country, and are seeking ways in which these systems can be reexamined through a 21st-century, anti-racist lens.

One of the loudest conversations is around law enforcement. Should we “defund the police”? What exactly does that mean? How would that happen?
And within the nuance of these discussions lies social work. How can social workers collaborate with police? Should they? And when?

As a dean of a college containing schools of both social work and criminal justice, Luna is immersed in these questions daily.

“I live it every day,” she said. “I do acknowledge and recognize that there are serious and systemic problems that we need to tackle, address, and change. But I also believe in how the two professions of social work and criminology/criminal justice can really come together to provide solutions.”

Luna believes that nurturing the relationship between the two professions will inspire positive change and have a lasting impact. In her view, the unique partnership will be a catalyst in addressing societal needs and championing systemic reform.

“In these two professions, we deal with a lot of things in common—mental health, family reintegration, children and families, juvenile justice, discrimination,” she said. “Both professions provide direct services to vulnerable and marginalized populations. Both strive for justice and equal access to care for individuals. The way I see it, we have more to offer if we come together.”

BRINGING ACTION AND INNOVATION TO THE COMMUNITY

In her role as founding dean, Luna hasn’t rested on her many accomplishments. She’s already taken direct initiative to show her communities—both in Boca Raton and across the country—how social work and criminal justice can work together for a better world.

One tangible outlet comes in the form of what the college calls community conversations. Through these free events presented twice per semester, leaders in the social work and criminal justice fields are brought together—virtually, for now—to examine cross-disciplinary issues like reintegration and victim advocacy from their own unique perspectives.

The goal, Luna said, is to highlight the overlap and the importance of integrating these professions. And she believes in the importance of community input—the virtual “doors” are open to anyone.

“How do you work with this topic from the angles of both professions, and how is it that we complement one another?” Luna said. “Many times, we have these conversations within academia—researchers, faculty, talking to one another—but we believe real change occurs when we open it up and engage the community.”

A BORN LEADER

“She distinguished herself in every way,” Berkman said about Luna. “She is exceptionally smart, hardworking, dedicated, and a born leader.”

Berkman said it best. Yes, Luna has been a student, researcher, clinician, professor, director, and now a dean. But most of all, she is a leader.

“I want to be remembered as the person who represented the values of our professions—because I represent two professions now,” she said. “[I want to be remembered] as someone who leads with integrity and respects the dignity and worth of every individual as a guiding principle—a person who forged the new generation of ethical practitioners in social work and criminal justice, and came up with tangible and innovative solutions to monumental problems.”

So, what’s her motivation behind it all? Why did she pursue a career in social work, and why is the profession so important to her today?

The way social workers answer this question, while always unique, seems to share a common theme. They just want to help people, making a difference and leaving a legacy of a better world.

“Not only do I have this ability to help people on a daily basis, but also the way I understand people and society in general now,” Luna said. “I don’t only understand them for the individuals they are, but I understand them as an individual within larger and complex systems. I think that really highlights the uniqueness of who we are as social workers. I love that about social workers. That’s who we are.”
Nobody forges lasting and meaningful change without the support of a collective.

— Debra McPhee, Ph.D., Dean
When Our Heroes Look to Us for Help

As a social worker, at some point you will perform a needs assessment. When a situation is challenging, you must be the first to ask, “What’s the need?” This is the initial step to overcoming any obstacle.

For Kara Byron, GSS ’19, that need came from her hero.

“My father created a legacy for himself,” she said. “He wanted everyone around him to enjoy life.”

In 2015, Byron got news that her father had been diagnosed with a neurodegenerative disease, one that causes nerve cells in the brain to progressively lose function and die, inevitably leading to the loss of autonomic functions in the body.

An undergraduate at the University of Southern California at the time, Byron would soon be set on a path that changed her life forever.

At that point, she knew the need. Only one question remained: How?

FINDING ANSWERS THROUGH SOCIAL WORK

In 2013, Byron began her undergraduate degree at USC with an undecided major, but quickly decided to pursue psychology with a minor in forensics. A mix of fascination with addiction and crime, combined with the desire to understand people at their very core, drew her to find the science behind the struggle.

“I was fascinated with the ‘why,’” she said. “Why do they have these issues? Why haven’t they gotten help? Are they really bad people, or is there something else behind it?”

It was that curiosity which led her to take a social work course, Adolescent Gang Development, during her senior year. Byron said she didn’t know much about the social work profession at that point, but it didn’t take long for her to realize the field aligned with her passions.

“The professor defined social work and the holistic modalities used to understand people, groups, communities, and families, and it was so interesting,” she said.

It was in this class that Byron learned what social work was really about: looking at the influences and factors on a micro, mezzo, and macro level, and forming actionable solutions to help the individual, group, community, or family involved.

 “[The experience] turned into, ‘Wow, social work encapsulates everything that I want to do. I want to go on this path and learn more.’”

Byron spent that semester working with local gang members in the Compton area, south of Los Angeles. The experience solidified her interest in the social work profession, and she knew her path was headed toward an M.S.W.

Then, her father fell ill.

A FAMILY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Multiple system atrophy (MSA-c) is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that affects both movement and the autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary action such as blood pressure or digestion, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.
Byron’s father, a successful businessman in his 50s at the time, wasn’t quick to accept the limitations of the disease.

“He exceeded all the doctors’ expectations because of his spirit,” Byron said in an interview with Good Grief podcast.

After graduating from USC, Byron was still interested in pursuing a path in social work. She still wanted to find out that “why.” But she needed to be close to her dad.

“I knew that wherever I was going to spend the next two years, I wanted to be close to him,” she said.

So she headed back across the country and enrolled at Fordham GSS, headed for the next challenge. But no matter what, she’d be by her father’s side.

DISCOVERING A ‘SOCIAL WORK STIGMA’

In her time at GSS, Byron learned about something she calls the “social work stigma”—the idea that social workers supposedly make little money, and that an M.S.W. offers limited career options.

“The main driver of this industry is humanity and relationships and helping others, but you also need to sustain a life for yourself,” Byron said. “When people view themselves as though they shouldn’t make enough or that they aren’t worthy enough, then they embody that. I wanted to reduce that stigma and help people feel good about themselves and our profession—instead of the opposite.”

Byron sought to break down the barriers of tradition, carve a different path with her degree, and help others thrive along the way.

“When people look at social work, they say two things: they say, ‘Oh you’re a social worker, so you must work in [job type] A, B, or C, and you make no money,’” she said. “That was constantly what people would say to me, not, ‘Oh my god, what do you do, and are you loving it and feeling fulfilled?’”

She thought the questions were all backwards and stemmed from this stigma. This, in turn, forced students to create ceilings for themselves and their careers.

“[How can] students thrive and figure out their passions if they’re feeling so limited all the time?” she asked.

So, another need arose: empower social work students to be more than what a stigma says they are.

The how: create a platform to help them.

FORMING LEAP

Byron formed the idea for her Lead, Empower, Act with Purpose (LEAP) program while sitting in class, discussing the stigma issue. What could be done to counter these stereotypes? How could she and her classmates break down the barriers that seemed to appear once they began the MSW program?

LEAP was Byron’s answer. Through this program, Byron reached out to professionals in the tristate area who had gotten their M.S.W. degrees, but whose careers didn’t fall into one of the more traditional social work paths. She contacted lawyers, entrepreneurs, and even Academy Award-winning filmmakers to come speak at LEAP events.
“I thought, “There’s so much more out there that social workers can do and be recognized for,” Byron said. “I wanted to spearhead some initiative starting here at Fordham where we get people in other industries to acknowledge us, to accept us, and to understand that we bring a critical skill set to whatever work or environment we’re in.”

The series took off. LEAP events scaled to over 100 people and brought a fresh perspective to students entering the profession, combining both the traditional aspects learned in class and a look toward the future outside the linear path. Byron raised funds to supply an engaging atmosphere for each event, fit with a bar and catering service. Her vision was to create a relaxing space for networking—an activity she felt the field lacked.

“People network in finance, tech, and business—why don’t people network in our industry?” she asked.

**BECOMING A PARENT’S CARETAKER**

While completing her degree and acting as the face of LEAP’s events, Byron also took on the responsibility of being a caretaker to her father.

As his condition worsened, Byron’s father became completely dependent on his daughter to survive. She would commute to campus from her home in New Jersey and, in her spare time, research the disease and how to best provide care.

Byron helped her family build out a private duty nursing company for her father. She spent countless hours over the years not only recruiting, staffing, and training nurses, but also building relationships with those nurses and ensuring her father had the overall best quality of care.

“I had to learn how to become a nurse without actually becoming one,” she said in the Good Grief interview. “I had his life in my hands 24/7.”

Byron’s role reversed from daughter to a sort of parent, and she had to constantly watch over her father for his own safety. This included activities such as bathing, dressing, and walking him.

Byron did whatever she could to keep spirits high. She’d put together intimate dinners and themed gatherings for her father, their family, and his friends. She called this her way of “making meaningful moments.”

“I would create these experiences for my family and my father’s friends so that his normal was normal, and so he could live life to the fullest every day, experiencing everything he’d want to experience,” she said. “Whether it was themed nights or dinners or intimate celebrations with my sisters getting married, he could be a part of everything and not feel limited or that he couldn’t participate.”

This was a man who had built himself up from nothing. Who never missed a recital or sports game, even if it meant flying home from a work meeting in Chicago that day, and always put family first. Who sent his daughters Valentine’s Day cards every year without fail, even when they studied abroad on the other side of the world.

He’d lost his ability to speak and move, but not to connect with the ones he loved. Byron said the two communicated in other ways, making it work however they could. Subtle things like eye movements became the only dialogue that mattered.

**GRADUATION FROM GSS**

Graduating with Fordham’s Class of 2019, Byron gave an address at the diploma ceremony for the Graduate School of Social Service.
In front of 7,000 people, she conquered her fear of public speaking and taught everyone in attendance about “Byron’s Law of the Four P’s,” passed on to her by her father, who watched from the audience.

“The Four P’s are preparation, persistence, passion, and purpose,” Byron said. “Utilizing this framework in every aspect of life will take you far.”

Throughout the speech, Byron stole glances to her right and smiled. She spoke about how everyone has their “someone,” and hers was in the crowd, cheering her on, like he always had.

“My someone inspired me to follow my hopes and dreams,” she said. “He encourages me to never settle, but to take charge of my life.”

And she had. In the prior few years, Byron had earned two degrees, made countless connections and moments with others, discovered her entrepreneurial spirit, and dedicated her days to the person she loved most.

Her words that day had power—but her expression, the light in her eyes, carried the world.

**SELF-CARE IN TIMES OF TURMOIL**

Shortly after graduation, Byron worked for GSS directing alumni relationships as a consultant. Due to some family health challenges and her father’s progressed condition, she stepped down from her role at GSS and continued as his caretaker.

Byron lost her father to MSA-c in May 2020.

She noted that her support system in this time was incredible. But the prior four years of her life had been a perpetual state of uncertainty, and it was time to take a step back.

“I’ve done a lot for myself in these past eight months,” she said. “I’ve worked toward a place to acknowledge and understand exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

She needed a break from worry, from pressure. This is something we all need to remind ourselves—especially social workers. Sometimes it’s hard to conduct a mental health needs assessment on yourself when so many depend on you.

This self-care can be hard to implement in a world where so much is expected of us. Add the overflow of information from pedestal-like platforms like social media, and it’s hard to feel as though a break is ever deserved.

“Oftentimes, people are uncomfortable talking about death and grief, and so most don’t understand that it’s a process. And everyone’s process and journey with grief is different. I’m so proud of everything I’ve done, of the person I am, and of where I’m going in life.”

**LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE**

Byron was never your traditional social worker. Both her experience with her father and nonlinear approach to social work shaped how she viewed life.

“I don’t have one path,” she said. “And without those experiences with my dad, I wouldn’t be who I am today.”

Byron’s goal is to uplift people and enhance their quality of life, and in doing so, make meaningful moments—both for herself and others. She said it’s important to celebrate the milestones in life, but to make sure those in-between times are not forgotten.

Because the in-between is where we really live.

“Time is a gift; it’s precious,” she said. “If you don’t celebrate the time in between, you’re going to regret it.”
Sameena Azhar, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor Sameena Azhar was cited by The Washington Post for her research article “You’re so exotic-looking: An Intersectional Analysis of Asian American and Pacific Islander Stereotypes.”

Jordan DeVylder, Ph.D.
Associate Professor Jordan DeVylder co-authored “From Womb to Neighborhood: A Racial Analysis of Social Determinants of Psychosis in the United States” in the American Journal of Psychiatry.

Rahbel Rahman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor Rahbel Rahman published “Brazil’s Community Health Workers Practicing Narrative Medicine: Patients’ Perspectives” in the Journal of General Internal Medicine.

Kimberly Hudson, Ph.D.

Derek Tice-Brown, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor Derek Tice-Brown published “It helped, the mindfulness, ... so let me help’: High School Students Developing Social Work Values Through Yoga” in the Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics.

Carole Cox, Ph.D.

Tina Maschi, Ph.D.
Professor Tina Maschi published “Aging in Prison and Correction Policy in Global Perspectives” in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Dana Alonzo, Ph.D.
Professor Dana Alonzo and Associate Professor Marciana Popescu received a $150,000 grant from the Mother Cabrini Foundation to help women asylum seekers in New York City gain access to much-needed mental health care.
GSS James R. Dumpson Chair in Child Welfare Studies Anne Williams-Isom, D.Min., was featured on MSNBC’s Morning Joe segment and in Forbes as a trailblazer in the field of education.

As part of their “50 over 50” campaign, Forbes described Williams-Isom as the “unsung hero” of their list of women over 50 making a difference in education, and a “champion for equal-access education in the U.S.”

Cassandra Agredo, LMSW, GSS ’06, was named to City & State New York’s “2021 Nonprofit 40 Under 40 list.”

As the executive director at Xavier Mission, Agredo dedicates her organization to providing food, shelter, clothing, and more to New Yorkers in need. She says Xavier Mission is not a “nonprofit,” but rather a “for-impact” organization.
This year’s theme for National Social Work Month was “Social Workers are Essential.”

To celebrate, we asked GSS students and alumni why social workers play such a vital role in society. Read some of their answers below.

Harleny Vasquez, LMSW
GSS ’18
Social Work Supervisor and Social Work Coach

“Social Workers are essential because we hold the power to change lives. We provide the framework needed to help our clients realize their highest potential regardless of their current struggles and obstacles. Together we show up and elevate one another.”

Adam McReynolds
MSW ’18
Social Worker for Veterans Health Administration

“As a veteran myself, social workers assist veterans with many challenging life issues including transitioning to civilian life or the unimaginable trauma related to combat. I am proud to support our troops back home.”

Kathryn Harter
MSW ’21
Geriatric MSW Intern at Met Council

Social workers are essential in the fight for human rights and social justice.

Hector I. Ortiz
MSW ’21
Social Work Intern, Bellevue Hospital Safety Net Clinic

“Social workers are essential in working towards a more just and equitable society.”

Esther Deutsch
GSS ’17
Operations Manager at RCS Professional Services (RCSProServices) & Adjunct Professor at Lackawanna College

“Social workers are essential because mental health matters and no one should have to suffer in silence.”

Hannah Babiss
MSW ’21
Policy Intern at New York Immigration Coalition

“Social workers are essential advocates for individuals and communities.”
Academia’s Storyteller: Meet Jenn Lilly, GSS’s Newest Faculty Member

As humans, we form connections through stories. A story is a source of intrigue or nostalgia—a ball of yarn with a thread loose, or snapshots hung to the fridge. Jenn Lilly, Ph.D., has searched for stories her whole life.

“Stories invoke human empathy,” Lilly said. “Throughout time, they’ve been the way we communicate who we are and what our values are. This is all embedded within stories.”

The search for narrative threads is what got her interested in film, and how she could use that medium to promote social justice. Now, as GSS’s newest faculty member, she wants to unearth a different type of snapshot—the unsmiling ones, those which slipped from the magnet’s grip, or didn’t make it to the fridge at all.

“Uncovering these stories that are more marginalized or not part of the dominant discourse is really important,” said Lilly, who came to GSS in spring 2021. “[It helps us] understand the ways that oppression is functioning, and the ways in which we can dismantle racism and other forms of oppression, and ultimately get to a place where we’re making progress in social justice.”

GROWING UP WITH NONPROFITS
For Lilly, it started in Houston. She got her first job at age 12—teaching swimming to kids in the area—which snowballed into an interest in nonprofit organizations.

“I always worked in nonprofits with children in the community growing up,” she said. “I wish I were one of those people who had a clear direction and followed it through life, but it was more a meandering path for me.”
When that path brought her to high school, Lilly took extra shifts at a local Mexican restaurant to earn some spending money. Due to its location, Houston plays home to many undocumented Mexican immigrants, and the family who owned this restaurant fell into that demographic.

“I was the only person who worked there [whose first language wasn’t Spanish],” Lilly said. “I had this community of friends and heard their immigration stories. A lot of workers were undocumented, and I came to understand more of their struggles than I previously did, and what it was like to live life in the shadows.”

The stories Lilly heard in that restaurant struck an important chord. They reminded her of her grandfather, another storyteller and influence in Lilly’s life, an Italian immigrant who came to America looking for something better. Hearing those same dreams after a double shift brought back memories.

“[Those immigration stories] stuck with me,” she said. “[My grandfather] always told those same kinds of stories; he was my hero growing up. I connected his experience with this contemporary experience of the Latinx population. It’s a social justice issue I really care about.”

FROM FILMMAKER TO RESEARCHER
After high school, Lilly found a love for film. She realized the medium was a powerful tool for raising awareness, and grew particularly interested in social justice documentaries.

“Social work has that natural fit with documentary,” she said.

Lilly went to the University of Central Florida for her undergraduate degree in interdisciplinary studies, and stayed in Orlando after graduation ready to hit the job market running. She landed a job at a local youth program and was ecstatic. This was her chance to get back in the nonprofit sector and make a difference.

However, once she got there, her optimism slowly began to fade, and she questioned how much of a difference she could actually make. “[It wasn’t] my first experience working with a racialized group of young people, but it was the most intense experience of that for me,” she said. “I found myself going into the job optimistic out of college, but then felt like I was ill-prepared to meet the needs of this community.”

However, Lilly wasn’t going to give up. She kept working in youth programs and met with those she knew attending graduate school for social work. She began to ask questions. Her path found its next turn.

“I saw social work graduate school as an opportunity to gain the analytic and practical skills I needed to make a better impact if I was going to continually work on a community level,” she said.

With that, it was off to Illinois to get her M.S.W. at Loyola University Chicago.

INTERNATIONAL WORK
In an interview for this article, Lilly showed a few decorations acting as her Zoom backdrop—gifts she received while working abroad with Indigenous communities in both Mexico and Guatemala.

Lilly’s international work began through her migration and immigration subspecialization at Loyola Chicago. In this subspecialization, Lilly
participated in a summer placement immersion program, which took place in San Cristobal de las Casas, in the Mexican state of Chiapas. She spent the summer working with Indigenous communities, women cooperatives, and girls who attended a residential educational program.

The experience proved transformative. When the summer ended, Lilly went back to Illinois; however, part of her stayed abroad.

“I knew I wanted to go back and live in Latin America,” she said. “[I wanted to] work on issues precipitating migration.”

But first, she concentrated her efforts at home. After graduating with her M.S.W., Lilly stayed in Chicago and worked for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. She had great success organizing a program for immigrant families in the city, but her desire to help those abroad kept calling.

“I got to a point in [my] life where I was going to either make the jump and move to Latin America,” she said, “or there were going to be things that piled up and prevented me from ever doing it.”

She made the jump. For two years Lilly lived in Guatemala, working with youth and integrating that work with her filmmaking. She wanted to help people at the source of their struggles.

Her grandfather would be proud.

ACADEMIA’S STORYTELLER
Just because Lilly now spends her days in the classroom or hunched over a research paper, that doesn’t mean she has forgotten the importance of stories. In fact, she uses that knack for narrative to enhance her everyday creations.

“I think of my academic writing as academic storytelling,” she said. “It’s just writing a story for a different audience with a little bit different structure. I’m always thinking about how narrative plays a role in all things I do.”

And she doesn’t limit that creativity to her writing. Lilly said film and digital media play a large role in communicating messages to her students, and getting them to interpret different viewpoints as part of their learning process.

“Film and stories are relational approaches to working with people and trying to see from their perspective,” she said.

That relational approach is part of the reason Lilly chose to teach at Fordham. As someone who has a Jesuit education herself, she’s experienced the Jesuit devotion to connectivity. Fordham proudly displays this through its commitment to cura personalis, or care of the whole person.

Lilly said she felt this attitude on her visit to campus last year (before the pandemic).

“I felt like I was embraced as a colleague right off the bat, and people were really supportive,” she said. “[Everyone was] open in terms of reaching out, telling me about other opportunities or things going on that might help out my work, or just being available to answer questions. [Fordham] felt like the right home.”

This semester, Lilly is teaching Social Work Practice with Families and Groups Across the Lifespan. She’ll teach about group facilitation—something upcoming social workers can often find themselves navigating early in their careers.

“I want my students to feel confident in facilitating groups and working with families,” she said. “I want them to walk away feeling like they are effective group facilitators. I feel like that’s something a lot of social work grads are thrown into without really anticipating it.”

Most of all, Lilly wants to bring to her students the feeling she experienced that first day on campus.

“The main word that comes to mind is supportive,” she said. “I want to be remembered as someone who supports not only my students’ learning, but also the myriad of other things going on in their lives—and I want them to feel supported through their learning experience in the classroom. I want them to feel challenged, but also supported in taking on those challenges.”