

SUMMER 2016

CONNECTING ALUMNI, FRIENDS AND COMMUNITY  
JACOBS SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO

# UB Medicine



## A STUDY IN HUMAN RIGHTS

UB MEDICAL STUDENTS  
ASSIST ASYLUM-SEEKERS





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WHEN THEY COME TO MEDICAL SCHOOL, THEY DON'T WANT TO LOSE THAT."

KIM GRISWOLD, MD '94, MPH, FACULTY ADVISOR

Founders of the Human Rights Initiative, left to right: Kathleen Soltis, Class of 2017; Lauren Jepson, MD '16; faculty advisor Kim Griswold, MD '94, MPH; Sarah Riley, MD '16; Rachel Engelberg, Class of 2018.



# Medical Students Step up to Help Asylum-Seekers

## ESTABLISH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE

BY MARK SOMMER

Asylum-seekers arrive in Buffalo from all over the world seeking a chance at a new life.

Many have fled horrific conditions to get here, including rape and torture.

Gaining permanent entry, however, requires presenting a convincing legal case, and that's where University at Buffalo medical students come in.

The Human Rights Initiative, run by medical students in the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, provides medical and psychological forensic evaluations for asylum-seekers. The students, working with medical professionals, schedule and organize interviews, including the use of interpreters, and serve as scribes for long and often emotionally draining sessions.

"The forensics evaluation documenting abuses really changes an asylum-seeker's application by providing medical proof to go with the person's story. It can strengthen their case," says Kim Griswold, MD '94, MPH, the group's faculty advisor, and an associate professor in the Department of Family Medicine.

Working with asylum-seekers is a powerful educational experience, students say.

"Helping start the Human Rights Initiative was the most meaningful component of my medical school experience," says Sarah Riley, MD '16, who co-founded the project in 2014 with fellow medical students Lauren Jepson, MD '16, and Kathleen Soltis, Class of 2017, under Griswold's guidance.

The work of the initiative occurs at a time when the world is facing its greatest migration crisis in over half a century. The United Nation's refugee agency claims there are more displaced people worldwide—some 50 million—than at anytime since World War II.

In New York State, the largest number of refugees are resettled in Buffalo.

There were 4,085 refugees in New York between October 2013 and September 2014, according to the most recent records compiled by the New York State Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance. Some 96 percent of the refugees were resettled in upstate and Western New York, with 1,380, the largest number, coming to Buffalo and Erie County.

Between March 2015 and March 2016, 1,357 refugees from 70 countries came to VIVE, (Vive La Casa), a 118-bed asylum center on Buffalo's east side. VIVE provides people with services they need to rebuild their lives, according to Anna Ireland, chief program officer for Jericho Road Community Health Center, which operates VIVE. Of these, fewer than 100 sought asylum in the U.S., the others seeking entry into Canada, where the government makes it easier to gain admittance.

### COLLABORATION AT ITS BEST

The idea for the Human Rights Initiative—formerly known as the WNY Human Rights Clinic—grew out of Riley, Jepson and Soltis's roles on the executive board of the student chapter of Physicians for Human Rights.

It's there they learned about student-run asylum clinics at several medical schools around the country, including Brown University, Cornell University, Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania.

At first, Riley, Jepson and Soltis were concerned that as full-time medical students they wouldn't have the time to do something similar at UB. Griswold convinced them to try.

Their opportunity came after a grant from the New York State Health Foundation in June 2014 established the Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture, a program of Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County, in collaboration with the UB Department of Family Medicine and Journey's End Refugee Services.

The Center for Survivors supports individuals and their families with legal, medical and other services. Griswold was named medical director, helping set the stage for a collaboration between the two newly-established groups.

Soltis, then serving as co-president of Physicians for Human Rights, interned that summer at the newly created center and helped recruit students into the Human Rights Initiative.

In October 2014, the UB students hosted an informational dinner to educate physicians about the mission of the Human Rights Initiative.





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KIM GRISWOLD, MD '94, MPH

Douglas Sawch, Class of 2018, and faculty advisor Kim Griswold, MD '94, MPH, meeting with an asylum-seeker.

Several more events were held in 2015 to publicize the initiative and provide training. That April, 22 UB medical students attended a Physicians for Human Rights training session at Yale University, where they learned how to listen to a torture survivor's story and to be a scribe. In June, a poster showing the development of the Human Rights Initiative was presented at the North American Refugee Health Conference in Toronto. And in November, a training session held in collaboration with HealthRight International drew 85 attendees to UB's South Campus. Participants included medical students, physicians, lawyers, social workers and other health professionals. Students also presented grand rounds in obstetrics/gynecology, internal medicine and psychiatry.

The group was recognized as a Polity club on campus that same year, and funds were received from several contributors to help defray costs. There were also collaborations with community organizations that shared a common mission.

As of March 2016, 68 medical students had been trained as scribes, and 19 medical

and 20 psychological forensic examinations had been conducted with individuals from 15 countries. Two clients received asylum, while the outcomes of the others were still pending.

## LEARNING TO LISTEN

Griswold conducts medical exams for the Human Rights Initiative in addition to advising students. UB psychiatrists examine people suffering from psychological trauma.

Griswold's work with refugees began as a nurse at VIVE from 1988 to 1992. She left to attend medical school, but continued to work with refugees and remains involved with VIVE by volunteering one day a month.

"Their stories are so hard to hear," Griswold says. "Many of the women we see in countries at war have experienced sexual violence. That is one of the most prevalent physical and psychological stories that we hear."

The majority of refugees coming into Buffalo are from Burma, Bhutan, Somalia and Iraq. The countries with the most asylum-seekers in recent years are the

Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Iran and Nigeria.

"Rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo is a weapon of war," Griswold says. "Women have often been raped not once but many times. Bondage is another, where women are kept captive as sexual slaves."

Griswold said people who speak out in repressive countries are frequently imprisoned and tortured. Yet leaving a repressive country doesn't suddenly wipe the past clean, she observes.

"Seeking asylum is one way to give them some measure of peace, but it can never eradicate what they went through, or the fact that they had to leave behind their family, perhaps forever," Griswold explains. "I think many of us can't imagine that."

Griswold says she worries about the toll the stories can take on students, and she holds meetings to help them process what they've heard. A positive for students, she feels, is that the forensic examinations help them learn more about communicating.

"Learning to listen is one of the most important things a physician can do with asylum-seekers or refugees telling their story,



as well as with folks with serious mental illness. Often people don't listen to them," Griswold says.

The program has been a valuable outlet for students who are concerned about suffering in other parts of the world, and want to help, she adds.

"These are students who are alert to the problems of the world. When they come to medical school, they don't want to lose that."

## POWERFUL MOMENTS

Kathleen Soltis, now a fourth-year student, volunteered in a low-income community as an undergraduate at Boston College, tutoring prison inmates, teaching science lessons at an inner-city elementary school and working in a homeless shelter.

"I was looking for those sorts of opportunities when I started medical school," she says. "Not initially, because medical school in the beginning is pretty overwhelming. But I felt as though something was lacking in my life, something I wasn't getting from the medical curriculum per se."

When Soltis first learned about the summer internship opportunity with the Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture, she sought out a public health course offered at UB on refugee populations. It was there she learned about Buffalo's refugee populations and how they differed from those seeking asylum.

Documenting abuse as a scribe, alongside medical doctors, seemed to be something that could make a difference.

And, she said, it has made a difference.

"It's a really, really powerful moment when you have the opportunity to bear witness to someone's story," Soltis says. "It's probably one of the first times that I felt that I was really making a difference early on in my career."

Soltis says that the stories she's heard are heartbreaking.

"We hear pretty trying tales, ranging from sexual assault, rape, imprisonment, torture with tools and electrocution. These are things you think you would only see in movies. Things you don't think are possible to ever hear about, we hear about."

## FORENSIC EVALUATION TRAINING

The Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture identifies clients and links them with the Human Rights Initiative. Forensic evaluations, which take place in the attending physician's office, are typically two to four hours, with a doctor, medical student and interpreter present.

The training that the students receive includes cultural competency and how to work with interpreters. The student scribes follow the Istanbul Protocol, which are international standards for the structure of a forensic exam and report. This structure makes them particularly valuable to immigration courts.

Students write down verbatim what the asylum-seeker says and strive to be an objective evaluator in their assessment. Afterwards, the student prepares the affidavit with the clinician, who adds the conclusion and impressions, and then sends it to the client's attorney.

Pam Kefi, who directs the Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture, said the UB medical students have played a vital role in the program, which has helped 160 individuals in its first two years.

"The students bring so much energy and attention to detail, and

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SARAH RILEY, MD '16

they put in hours late at night and on weekends," Kefi says. "It's amazing how they can do this work in the midst of doing all of their medical school responsibilities. We really stand in awe of them."

## CONTINUITY OF CARING

Rachel Engelberg, Class of 2018, directs clinical operations for the Human Rights Initiative, including the scheduling of forensic exams. She has been a scribe at six forensic exams since getting involved in April 2015.

"The people we see have been through these horrible experiences—worse than you could imagine—and yet they are so resilient," Engelberg says. "It's the first time I ever felt like I did something that truly mattered. I feel with medicine right now everything is long-term reward, but with this you can see the impact you are having."

First- and second-year medical students are recruited to ensure the Human Rights Initiative carries on. They and fourth-year students are the most involved, since third-year students are on rotation, and their time is restricted.

A three-year grant received by Jewish Family Service earlier this year for the Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture ensures the Human Rights Initiative will continue to be needed.

"By training students to be medical scribes, we are investing in the next generation to take over the clinic," explains Soltis, who leans toward a career in family medicine. In contrast, Riley is planning to be a psychiatrist and Jepson is preparing for a career in pediatrics.

"Our leadership represents a lot of different interests, but this is a topic that transcends all specialties," Soltis notes. "You never know when a refugee is going to show up at our doorstep. We got involved with this because we realized there was this unmet need. After the trauma they have faced, it seems like providing a forensic examination is the least we can do."

Jepson says she plans to continue working with refugees and asylum-seekers and to broaden her understanding of health care in international settings, especially in areas of conflict.

"Though I grew up in Buffalo, I was naive about the large refugee and asylum-seeking populations here until medical school," Jepson says. "I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from these clients, to have wonderful mentors like Dr. Griswold and to work with such passionate medical students."