

Meet Tatiana Villarreal-Otálora

Originally from Colombia, Tatiana spent a good portion of her childhood migrating across the Americas with her family as her family followed work in the landscape industry. Ultimately, they settled in Georgia where her father established a successful business.

After getting her undergraduate degree from Georgia State, she earned a Master's degree at New York University and returned home to seek her Ph.D. at the University of Georgia. Upon her return, it became evident to her the stark difference in access, services and resources for Hispanics living in the state.

"I was living in big cities where, yes, there was a lot of poverty and a lot of health disparities, but there also were a lot of resources to help people," she said. "In coming back to Georgia, you realize there aren't many resources, especially for Latinx communities."

Working at an outpatient mental health facility in Gwinnett County, Tatiana also noticed that many of these families were coming in seeking help for children who were dealing with suicide, yet there simply weren't many resources available to support them. As a survivor of suicide, it was a deeply personal and ultimately inspired her to focus on developing the necessary preventative measures and intervention techniques that can address this issue.

"That's what led me into social work in general," said Tatiana, who begins a professorship at Kennesaw State University in January. "I want to figure out why I see so many of the same struggles within my community? That led me to social work. Coming back to Georgia and seeing the need in my community, I was like, well, I gotta do more."

Meet Jana Leigh Woodiwiss MSW'16

Jana emigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador when she was just a toddler, never knowing her birth parents as she was adopted by a family in Barrow County. And while Jana loves and cherishes her adoptive parents, who are white, she now can look back and recognize how that lack of connection to her birth parents fostered a lack of identity that impacted her.

That has heavily influenced her research interests at the School of Social Work. A doctoral student at UGA and recipient of a fellowship from the Southern Regional Education Board, she has focused much of her research on the impact immigration, and the various elements associated with it, has impacted Latinx children, including an emphasis on the trauma associated with current child separation policy.

Though she's not even sure if trauma is the right word anymore.

"I've kind of pulled back from the word 'trauma' because I think we need to do our part in helping the public understand why that term is being used," Jana said. "Until we clarify why we are using it, do we even use the word 'trauma' or should we use social problems or behavioral outcomes instead? Plus, there are different pathways that children may experience with these outcomes. For instance, a child that crosses the border and has been separated from his or her parents may have a different experience than a child who was brought here with his or her family, but might live in constant fear of the parents being deported."

Her hope is to be able to provide a pathway of understanding of these experiences for children dealing with these anxieties, fears and pressures, which can inform better ways to support and help them.

Now a mother of three close to wrapping up her studies, Jana also has been reunited with her birth mother. Though the pandemic has prevented her from meeting her in person, she said they've been able to connect through phone calls and video chats as she gets to know this part of her family.

"Because of COVID, I haven't been able to get over there to see them yet, so I'm hoping next year, I'll be able to go," she said. "But we have a family group chat, and I talk to them all the time. And, you know, they're just another big motivation for me doing the work I do."

Meet Caelen Javier Contreras BSW'21

Caelen is focused on breaking down barriers, whatever they may be, through his studies at the School of Social Work, as well as his internships and volunteerism. A native of California which has a large Latinx population, there are ample services and, most importantly, connections to access those services for communities in need.

What he's noticed in Georgia, however, are ample barriers in place that hinder access to everything from medical care to social services for Latinx communities. It has pushed him to do his part to bridge that gap, relying on his personal stories and the lessons learned in his pursuit of a degree in social work.

Caelen was the first bilingual speaker working at Positive Impact Health Centers, and he helped provide translation services to build better connections between the immigrant community in the surrounding area and the medical providers seeking to serve them.

"I have seen a lot of language barriers, but there also are a host of barriers to healthcare in minority communities and for whites in rural Georgia," he said. "Family support is a barrier for many people. They'll come in to get care, but they may not have anyone with them who can help answer questions from the doctor or take down the things they need to know."

Caelen believes his experience with social work will enable him to better understand the needs of the communities he's trying to help. In doing so, it can help remove some of those barriers and increase access for everyone.