
Finding Common Ground

Jerusalem's Haruv Institute is a world away from OU-Tulsa's campus, but graduate students in social work are finding a shared cause in dealing with the abuse of children in both cities.

By Mike Averill

Students at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa working toward their master's degree in social work are learning that problems and practices in their field in Oklahoma are quite similar to those encountered by their cohorts in Israel, thanks to a new exchange program. OU-Tulsa is partnering with the Haruv Institute at Hebrew University in Jerusalem to provide students from both universities an international perspective on child welfare, while sharing best practices from both countries. The exchange program is an extension of the relationship the two universities have with the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, which played a major role in supporting both campuses.

Former OU-Tulsa president Gerard Clancy, M.D., remembers being at a Schusterman Foundation function four years ago when the issue of child maltreatment and initiatives being carried out in Israel first came up.



Haruv students from Israel spent time on the Norman campus and heard from a panel of experts about the foster care system in Oklahoma. They also toured the Oklahoma Bombing Memorial and visited DHS county offices. **Bat-sheva Haas T**

“I thought, that’s great, because what we’ve done here in Tulsa with the Child Abuse Network has been something that the Schustermans have brought to Israel, and now there are five Child Abuse Network-type facilities using the Tulsa-model.”

As campus president, one of Clancy’s goals at OU-Tulsa was to provide students with an exceptional classroom education along with learning opportunities in the community and at a global level.

“This was a perfect opportunity to add those two pieces and make our graduate experiences here unique,” he says. “We go far beyond lecture and book learning. We will go to deep understanding of the community and go to other parts of the world to understand them, so this is a great next step in that direction.”

Last spring a group of graduate-level social work students from the Tulsa campus traveled to Israel through the program. Lisa Leung and Amanda Beard were among those making the trip.

Leung, who works with an adoption agency as well as attending OU-Tulsa, says she was impressed with the Israeli approach to working with children.

“They look at the person in his or her environment and help on a micro, macro and mezzo level,” she says. She calls the trip to Israel in May “amazing. To have the opportunity to see social work throughout other cultures and learn from others made the trip very impactful.”

Beard, who works with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services in addition to her studies, says the experience was “life altering.”

“I think the biggest thing I learned is how important family is in the way Israel does things, and in order to really help the children you have to focus on the family,” Beard says. “We do a lot of things right—and a lot of things wrong. My hope is that we can share the things that work for us and show them that not only do they struggle with some family issues—that those struggles are cross cultural.”

In October, students from Haruv, including Ochre Amitai, made a trip to Tulsa. Amitai was born in St. Louis but returned to be with her family in Israel when she was a young child. While pursuing her master’s in social work at Hebrew University, she works as an animal assistance therapist at a boarding school for children. Amitai says she appreciates the chance to learn from the services provided in Tulsa and to use them to improve services back in Israel. One of the major differences she sees between Israel and the U.S. in the care

of neglected children is that in Israel, 80 percent of those children live in institutional boarding homes and only 20 percent are put into foster care, an opposite approach to that done in the states.

“It’s interesting—the benefits and disadvantages to both systems,” she says.

Asher Ben-Arieh, professor and director of the Haruv Institute in Jerusalem, Israel’s leading center on child abuse and neglect, says the exchange program is having a positive impact on all the students and their work moving forward.

“We are building a partnership slowly but surely,” Ben-Arieh says. “This partnership allows them to share solutions and share their dreams of how to improve the field and build a better world.”

The partnership is the first for students at OU-Tulsa in terms of a long-term exchange relationship with another university in dealing with a difficult societal challenge such as child abuse.

“When we went over there, we learned a great deal about the barriers of starting to work on child maltreatment that really come from cultural divides and religious divides that are part of Israel,” Clancy says. “We brought those students over here . . . and just as in Israel, there are many cultural issues around family and relations with the government. These Israeli students actually said they thought our cultural issues were more complex than theirs.”

Another thing the partnership has shown is that education is the key to solving complex issues such as child maltreatment.

“If you want to change culture around child maltreatment interventions, your best long-term investment is the education model you are using to train the up-and-coming students who will be practitioners in that world,” Clancy says.

The Haruv Institute has gone beyond the training of its students and added an increased focus on training practitioners, something OU-Tulsa hopes to do as well. One of the tools it uses is a new simulation facility OU-Tulsa has for its medical students that will also have a component for social services graduate students. They will be able to prepare for investigations and interventions around child maltreatment with trained actors playing the roles in real-life surroundings.

“Child abuse investigation and intervention is very stressful territory, and you do much better if you’ve practiced it,” Clancy says. “Frankly, part of the need to do it right is

sometimes these are criminal investigations, and you have to do the questioning in the right order so you don't harm the criminal investigation side.”

Making things more difficult is the settings in which the investigations often take place—inside unclean apartments, for example. The simulation facility will allow students and practitioners to practice working in those often-uncomfortable environments.

“We crank it up and try to make it as real life as we can,” Clancy says. “Haruv is already doing an excellent job with that.”

With Haruv being one of the international leaders in providing educational opportunities in child maltreatment, Clancy says OU-Tulsa has been able to raise its level of sophistication and credibility because of this partnership.

“This brings OU-Tulsa up to their level, and the fact they are learning from us is gratifying because the things we are doing well here can be brought back to one of the international leaders,” Clancy says.

The exchange program is also a way to provide an enriched campus experience to students in a world where online education is a major competitor to traditional universities.

“You can get bachelor's, master's and sometimes even doctoral degrees online,” Clancy says. “So what distinguishes traditional universities from those online? Experiences. It's the human interaction, the conflict, the training of the people themselves, the experience of the university that distinguishes us.”

Mike Averill is a freelance writer living in Tulsa.