Introducing 2019 International Child Welfare Exchange Team from Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, University of Oklahoma, USA!

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As a faculty member in the school of social work I teach courses on human development and social policy. I completed my PhD in Public Administration in December 2016 from Tennessee State University. Before returning to graduate school, I worked over 15 years in professional social work practice. Seven of those years I served as the Director of Training and Professional Development in Tennessee child welfare system. I have also practiced in community mental health center, courts, jails, and prison settings.

My research is focused on child welfare outcomes and the influence of policy implementation, administrative decision-making and workforce development on child and youth outcomes. I am particularly interested in the youth who turn 18 while still in foster care. I am working with a research team to explore how we may use Hope Theory as a framework to improve assessment, planning and interventions aimed at supporting youth during the early transition to adulthood. The other area of interest includes child welfare workforce and the use of social simulation in training and professional development of child welfare specialists.

I am excited for the learning experience from this exchange with Haruv. The opportunity to study and explore programs and policies in child welfare in Israel will be helpful in stretching my own thinking about research, policy and decision-making.
Kasey Rinehart
Haruv USA Graduate Assistant

Hi all! I am a graduate student and graduate assistant for the School of Social Work at OU-Tulsa. I have had the pleasure of being a graduate assistant for Haruv USA for a year and a half now. It is such an honor to be a part of the student exchange program. A little bit about me: I was born in Ohio and I lived in Michigan until I was three years old, then my family moved to Tulsa. I have lived in Tulsa ever since. In May 2017, I graduated from the University of Oklahoma-Norman with an undergraduate degree in Psychology. As a senior at OU, I had the opportunity to spend a year with my sister, who was a freshman at the time. Both of my parents graduated from the University of Oklahoma as well. I am definitely born and raised a Sooner! I met my fiancé at OU, and he is currently enlisted in the military. Both of us will graduate our programs in May 2020.

At my practicum site this year, I have had the opportunity to work alongside a social services specialist at Mark Twain Elementary School. Twice a week, I help students with any difficulties they might be experiencing at school. One of my roles is to develop success plans for students, along with working one-on-one with children who might be struggling with behavioral problems, or relational problems with other students or teachers. This has been such a unique experience and has helped me to realize that I am very interested in learning more about school-based social work.

One thing that excites me most about the opportunity to go to Israel is learning about the different agencies and the services they provide to their community. I have had the chance to tour many of the agencies located in Tulsa, and I have a grasp on the work they provide. It will be wonderful to experience how the agencies in Israel operate, and hopefully take my newfound knowledge back to Tulsa and apply it to my social work career someday.
Hello everybody! I would like to begin by extending my gratitude and appreciation to Haruv USA Institute for this incredible educational opportunity. I was born in Australia in August of 1990. I come from a Lebanese nationality, and I am currently holding the US permanent resident status (green card). In my early childhood I lived in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, however, my family eventually settled in Kuwait, in 1994. I went to a British school until the age of 18, at which point I applied to the University of Oklahoma as an International Student. During my time in the Middle-East I witnessed oppression, discrimination, and many social injustices to women, children, and minorities. This fueled my passion for helping others which led me to pursue an undergraduate degree in Psychology and a graduate degree in Social Work.

In my first semester’s practicum sites I gained valuable experience from the National Resource Center for Youth Services (NRCYS) and the Child Abuse Network (CAN). At NRCYS I was able to learn about macro policies that are involved at the Department of Human Services (DHS), such as the Pinnacle Plan, and its effect on child-welfare. I also learned about the foster care system and I attended trainings involved with foster and kinship families. At CAN I shadowed multiple Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW) who specialized in Forensic Interviewing. I witnessed countless interviews using the evidence-based intervention, Child First. I also attended weekly multidisciplinary District Attorney (DA) Task Force meetings. At this meeting, DHS caseworkers, LCSW forensic interviewers, Tulsa Police Department detectives, Doctors, and the DA collaborate on reducing child maltreatment.

I am truly excited about this opportunity to travel to Israel and learn about their Social Work micro and macro practices. Having lived in the Middle-East, and having learned about the Arab-Israeli conflict, I am keen to learn how Israel is able to provide social justice and uphold the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics in that type of environment. My experience and education in Israel will enable me to reduce children maltreatment and enhance their well-being everywhere as Israel is in one of the most hostile, and politically-sensitive locations in the world.
Hello! I grew up in rural Oklahoma and I have lived in Seattle, WA and several areas in Texas. I have been back living in Tulsa, OK since 2011 and attend OU through the Tulsa campus. I have travelled a variety of places including working in a refugee camp in Albania and attending a child welfare conference in the Philippines. My career in Child Welfare began in Texas in 2006. I worked with children in inpatient psychiatric settings and group homes prior to entering the child welfare field. My experience has been largely in investigations, with two years of work as a Forensic Interviewer. Since 2015, I have been developing and implementing a local training unit in Tulsa Co., Oklahoma to help improve the on-boarding, training, and support experience of new employees as they enter the child welfare field. I work with all new child welfare personnel in Tulsa Co. for their first few months with the agency, providing basic training on general social work skills, interviewing techniques, and best practice in Child Welfare.

Child abuse and neglect is a social problem with complex interventions. The role of child welfare is critical in addressing this challenge and quality training is critical to consistent and effective practice in working with families. I love the work I do and value opportunities to support perspective shifts and skill development with colleagues in this field. This is a challenging field and my hope is to offer the support needed as they develop their own practice in a way that is sustainable for them to maintain in this work. I am always excited to explore the different ways others may approach these and other components of the child welfare practice. I am hopeful to implement skills learned as I continue to develop this training program and throughout my career in Child Welfare as I advocate for systemic change that could benefit both the children of our community and those investing in a career in Child Welfare. This is what I am most excited about in connecting with others to explore international approaches to Child Welfare through travelling to Israel and working with those who travel to Tulsa.
Stephanie Gleese Rivers
Graduate Student

Hello friends and colleagues! I was born and raised in Oklahoma and currently live in McAlester, which is in rural southeast Oklahoma. I received my undergrad degree from the OU Norman campus in Multidisciplinary Studies, with a focus in English Literature. I am married and have an 11-year-old son and a 17-year-old step daughter. We have a small acreage of land where we enjoy raising pet goats and two dogs. My family and I love getting out and taking advantage of all the outdoor activities Oklahoma has to offer.

I have worked for the Department of Human Services Child Welfare Division for almost seven years. I began my career in child welfare as a child protective services worker, where I conducted investigations to determine whether children were safe to remain in their homes and worked to connect families to needed services. I then became a Team Decision Making (TDM) meeting facilitator, where I lead meetings of child welfare staff, families, and community partners to make team decisions regarding child safety and placement. My current position is a regional Safety Analyst. This position is a great fit for me because I have a passion for older youth in care and supporting them in reconnecting with family, achieving permanency, and transitioning to adulthood.

I am most excited about the opportunity to connect with you all and learn from each other how to further our work in serving deprived children. I am excited to learn about ways that other cultures and countries work with older youth in care and support them in their transition to adulthood. I am also interested in learning different ways to work with and support biological families to reunification, as well as foster families during placement. I am looking forward to being able to share the unique challenges families in rural areas face when working with the system as well.
E’Ula Green
Graduate Student

My life’s journey began in West Africa; the family that I was born into is one that has always been committed to social service. While I will be the first to acquire a master's degree in Social Work, there are many social servants that include ministers, teachers, therapists, nurses, musicians, artists, historians, and financial advisers. These family dynamics have deeply impacted my perspective on life by making me highly aware of the needs of others around me. I have spent most of my life traveling internationally with my family on missions of service. I have participated in medical mission trips, trips to build and reinforce infrastructures and buildings, I have assisted with nutritional needs assessment and fulfillment, educational camps, safety education, and a host of other types of activities directed toward individuals, families, and communities that are under-served and less fortunate. I am extremely interested in learning more ways to positively impact the lives of others in this area of international child welfare.

I have seen a lot of injustice towards children in my life, and I have made a commitment to always be an advocate for those that cannot speak up for themselves. In some way or another, we all need an advocate. It is an honor and a privilege to use whatever influence and strength my words and presence offer on behalf of a child. This is something that I fervently believe in. I am so committed to it that I have opened my home to children in the form of a bridge foster parent. I speak up wherever I can, but I also know that words are only a part of the equation. Actions must accompany them. Sometimes that includes shelter and a safe, loving home environment. It is with that same passion that I present myself for this exchange opportunity. I am willing to go into the dark places and either deliver a light to the children or deliver the children to the light. I am not afraid to get my hands dirty and put in the work necessary to participate in such a worthy endeavor. Children are our best resource. It is up to us to make sure that they make it to adulthood as whole and as safely as possible. My personal mission within the profession of social work is to not merely make a living, but to make a genuine difference.
I am from Cynthiana, Kentucky, but I now live in Norman, Oklahoma. My Bachelor’s degree is in Spanish and International Studies. I am a first year Master of Social Work student at OU’s Norman campus. I am a Graduate Research Assistant working on a research project about refugee mental health and another concerning youth aging-out of the foster care system. I previously worked as an English as a Second Language intern for a refugee resettlement agency. I also have completed volunteer work at an all-girls orphanage in Guatemala City.

Israel is a country that has fascinated me for years, because it is a land where the histories and cultures of the world’s major religions coincide. I am excited to visit the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood and discover how to work and interact with individuals from highly traditional backgrounds. Furthermore, I am interested to learn more about trauma-informed interventions with children. My career goal is to work with refugee resettlement and integration, thus everything that I learn about international child welfare will be highly applicable to my future clients. I look forward to meeting the Israeli students and staff and discovering all the differences and similarities we have with one another, both personally and academically.
Mason Rodgers
Graduate Student

I am a graduate student at the School of Social Work at University of Oklahoma-Norman campus. It is an honor and privilege to participate in the student exchange program. I was born and raised in Oklahoma. I spent three years in Waxahachie, TX, getting my bachelor’s degree. I had the opportunity of attending school with my brother and meeting my future wife in college. While my wife was in graduate school, we lived in Virginia Beach, VA for two years, before moving to Tulsa, and then back to Oklahoma City.

For the past five years, I have worked for the Oklahoma Department of Human Services in Child Welfare. I have worked in several areas including Child Protective Services, Foster Care, and Recruitment and Development. Currently, my work is focused on finding families for children with all types of disabilities. In this role, I have partnered with the J.D. McCarty Center in Norman which is a children’s rehabilitation hospital that provides in-patient services to these children. Approximately two-thirds of the children at the J.D. McCarty Center are currently in state custody. As a liaison between this facility and the Department of Human Services, I participate as a part of an interdisciplinary team that focuses on the overall well-being of the child. As the children become ready for discharge from the hospital, I am involved in their placement. Finding foster and adoptive homes is a particular area of interest in Oklahoma that DHS hopes to improve.

The reason I am excited about this trip to Israel is probably similar to most of my colleagues. However; I feel that I have a slightly different perspective and interest in learning about how another culture addresses the problem specifically related to children with significant emotional, physical and intellectual disabilities. I think that what I learn on this trip could be invaluable in my work with the J.D. McCarty Center.
Yá’át’ée! (hello in the Navajo language) My name is Myra Swager and I grew up on the Navajo Reservation in Northern Arizona. I am an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation. My husband, our 11-year-old daughter, and I reside in Choctaw, Oklahoma. Two months after graduating high school I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and served four years on active duty. After being honorably discharged in 2009 I went back to school and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Human Relations with a minor in Native American Studies from the University of Oklahoma. I am currently enrolled at the Norman campus pursuing my Masters in Social Work.

I am employed at the Oklahoma Department of Human Services as an Adoption Specialist and have been serving families of Oklahoma for a little over five years now. My daily tasks include preparing adoption cases for children who are in permanent state custody and have an identified adoptive placement. I work closely with the adoptive family and adoption attorney to ensure they have all the information needed to move forward with finalizing their adoption. Furthermore, I work alongside the Permanency Planning workers assigned to the children in custody to ensure we have identified all possible barriers and are taking active steps to resolve those barriers. By eliminating barriers, we are able to finalize adoptions as swiftly as possible to allow the children and their forever families to begin the next chapter of their lives.

I am beyond excited to participate in this unique experience, and I am looking forward to learning new ways to help children and families who are faced with life obstacles. Moreover, I am eager to observe the Child Welfare system, and incorporate the new skills learned. This experience will further strengthen my passion to work with children impacted by trauma and ensure they are equipped with the resources and tools needed on their journey of healing. Ahéhee’! (thank you in Navajo)
Courtney Wahl
Graduate Student

Growing up, the concepts of empowerment, empathy, and the promotion of social justice were instilled in me. I decided to utilize these values by pursuing and graduating with my BSW from the Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work at the University of Oklahoma. I am currently pursuing my MSW under the same program. Going to school at OU was always a goal. It made sense for me as I lived just south of Norman in the quaint, little town of Noble. I am still residing in Norman today.

I began my Child Welfare journey as a practicum student at the Oklahoma Department of Human Services as part of the Child Welfare Professional Enhancement Program. I was hired on in Permanency Planning upon graduation in May 2015, working in both the Moore and Norman OKDHS Offices. In this position, I worked with families involved in the child welfare system to assist the children in obtaining permanency whether it was by returning to their family of origin or being adopted. In January 2018, I began serving families as a Child Safety Meeting Facilitator. These are strength and solution-focused meetings with a goal of making a consensus decision with the family on the placement of children.

I am incredibly excited for the opportunity to participate in the 2019 International Child Welfare Exchange Course. Experiencing new countries and cultures has always been one of my favorite things. So, I am naturally thrilled to travel to Israel! After presenting on another country’s child welfare system in my coursework, I have been filled with curiosity on how child welfare functions throughout the world. I most look forward to exploring what systems are in place for the families in Israel. Seeing areas in child welfare where systems are thriving and areas with opportunities for growth excites me for the progress that can be made in Oklahoma and throughout the world.
Andrea Weaver
Graduate Student

I was born in Tulsa and have lived my entire life in the northeast part of Oklahoma. My husband and I now live in a small town just outside of Tulsa, where we are raising our children and grandson. Our two oldest children are also college students, and one of our daughters plans to pursue a career in social work.

I began my social work career as a Parent Educator for a child abuse prevention program designed to empower at-risk families to raise their children safely. My role as an educator was to help families identify their strengths and needs, provide in-home parent education, and connect families with effective services to promote safe and stable parenting. I later gained employment with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services as a Child Welfare Specialist in Permanency Planning. As a permanency worker, I provided services to parents and children involved in the juvenile court system due to child abuse and neglect. For the past three years, I have been responsible for educating Oklahomans on the foster care and adoption needs of our state, recruiting families to foster and adopt, and assessing/developing homes to meet those needs.

My husband and I were foster parents for four years and fostered children ages newborn to 17. Three children that had been placed in our home through foster care were adopted into our family permanently. Although I am grateful for the blessings of these children, I am also very aware of a child’s instinctive need to know their natural family. I value parent education and family preservation efforts designed to keep children and parents together.

I am excited to learn about family preservation efforts in Israel and how those efforts can be applied to programs and services in Oklahoma. I look forward to meeting others committed to the safety and wellness of children and families!
Hello! My name is Jessica Winscher! I am a part-time graduate student in the School of Social Work at OU-Norman. I am currently completing my 2nd semester at the School of Social Work and hope to graduate in May 2021. I graduated from Oklahoma State University in May 2007 with a degree in Sociology and a minor in Spanish. I loved my time at OSU and was fortunate to spend a semester studying abroad in Madrid, Spain during my junior year. After graduating, I spent a year in Toledo, Spain working as an assistant English teacher at a language school. I enjoy travelling, meeting new people and experiencing cultures different from my own. I have been married to my wonderful husband Eric for 5 1/2 years. We live in Oklahoma City and have a 3-year-old son, young daughter, and 2 dogs.

My social work career began in 2009 when I started working for the Oklahoma Department of Human Services in the child welfare field. I have work and supervisory experience in permanency planning, adoption, foster care, and child welfare data analysis. I am passionate about adoption because both my sister and I were adopted as infants from private agencies. Growing up as an adopted person and learning about adoption ignited an interest in me to work with families and help others.

The International Child Welfare elective offers an opportunity for me to learn about the child welfare field from a new perspective. I have worked in child welfare for the past 10 years and am familiar with Oklahoma’s child welfare system. This class provides the chance for me to learn about new practices and approaches to child welfare. I am also excited to share knowledge and information about Oklahoma’s child welfare system with others. Social workers across the world are constantly advocating for additional funding and services. I believe in community learning and the benefit of learning from others. Each country has its own set of strengths and challenges it faces and having a more comprehensive understanding of child welfare will help me to best serve the community.