Helping Hands

They’re medical professionals, experts on autism and schoolteachers. They’re volunteers, giving their time and talent to aid their neighbors – children, the elderly, the poor and others in need – through service to community agencies and civic organizations. They’re University at Albany alumni, students and faculty, and they gladly lend a hand whenever and wherever it’s needed.

In this issue of UA Albany, we’re proud to profile a few of these thousands of dedicated women and men who help to make life better for others, both at home and abroad. In future editions, we’ll continue to highlight the contributions of graduates, students and faculty members who – through their exemplary service to others – connect the University with the wider world.
For nearly 40 years, UAlbany students have been helping others through the Community and Public Service Program (C PSP), a School of Social Welfare program open to all students and majors across campus. Now, the program, which began in 1970 as the Community Service Project, is expanding and embracing another progressive initiative: service learning.

“We’re trying to make service learning more prevalent here,” said CPSP Director Loretta Pyles, author of the book Progressive Community Organizing: A Critical Approach for a Globalizing World (2009, Routledge). Through a survey conducted with community partners, CPSP is brokering community needs in relation to faculty strengths. “We’re encouraging faculty to incorporate it into their courses by helping them find agencies, getting them to think about community needs, and exploring how these opportunities might fit into their own research and teaching interests.”

Pyles was hired by the School of Social Welfare in July 2008 to bring more academic rigor to student service endeavors and enhance CPSP’s ability to support faculty service-learning activities across disciplines. A request for proposals (RFP) focused on community-based research and service learning opportunities for Honors Program faculty; partnerships with the Institute for Teaching, Learning and Academic Leadership (ITLAL) and the Office of Undergraduate Education; and collaborations with the Capital Region Network of Universities and New York Campus Compact will aid Pyles in “taking CPSP to new heights.”

Annually, CPSP participants donate more than 40,000 hours to organizations on and off campus. In return for volunteering 60 to 100 hours a semester and writing a paper about the experience, each student receives academic credit; a maximum of three CPSP courses may be taken for credit. The opportunities available through the program also “help students choose majors, build their résumés and choose careers,” Pyles noted.

Kelly Morrone, manager of Volunteer Services at Albany Medical Center, enjoys working with CPSP participants. “We have students who might start out doing [volunteer work] for credit, and they may do all of it with us. Then, when they’re done with credit classes, a few will still stay with us.”

The Albany Police Athletic League (PAL) offers homework assistance, nutritious snacks, and extracurricular activities at 17 sites throughout the city. But “we wouldn’t be able to offer the number of activities that we provide without student participation. We’re a not for profit,” said director Leonard Ricchiuti. He also praises UAlbany students for being positive role models to the youngsters who participate in PAL, one of about 300 community organizations that benefit from CPSP.

School of Social Welfare Ph.D. student Sherri Stevens, M.S.W.’07, has worked in the CPSP office for two years and assists students in selecting volunteer assignments. “Some know exactly where they want to go”; for others, “we get a feel for the kind of environment they’re comfortable in, and we guide them to agencies. Some students want to be on campus, which is equally important. Student labor helps some of the organizations run.”

For his first CPSP course, African Student Association President Nana Y. Banful photographed activities sponsored by his organization. This semester, he is student coordinator for the Campus Leaders Round Table, a group that discusses UAlbany’s role in community change, forges new alliances and creates action plans for community engagement. “I believe in serving the community,” said Banful, a political science major set to graduate in 2010.

By Amy Halloran, B.A.’90

As a volunteer with Seal a Smile, a Healthy Capital District Initiative (HCDI) free dental-care program, senior and campus Pre-Dental Club President Mariam Sharifipour connects with local elementary-school students. The California native has also expanded CPSP’s outreach beyond the Capital Region: She received credit for a recent trip she arranged on her own, to provide free dental care to residents of a village in Mexico.

“It was such an amazing, rewarding experience,” remembered Sharifipour, a biology major and dental hygienist who plans to be a dentist. “We worked 10-hour days, and there were still lines wrapped around the building. On our last day there, [the villagers] were so grateful for our services that they had a big feast for us.”

For more information about CPSP, please visit www.albany.edu/cpsp.
Left: Bethani Gately, a social welfare major from Farmingville, N.Y., works with children at a Boys & Girls Club after-school program in Albany.

Opposite page: Biology major Mariam Sharifipour, a future dentist, traveled to Mexico recently to provide free dental care to villagers there. She received CPSP credit for the volunteer experience.
Tyrone G. Bristol, M.D., F.A.A.P., M.P.H.’07

Chosen by His Profession

By Carol Olechowski
Tyrone G. Bristol didn’t choose his career.
“Pediatrics chose me,” he maintains.

His profession, the Guyana native notes, represents his “best opportunity to impact on the health of those in the earliest stage of the life cycle. It affords great rapport with children and adolescents, and with parents and caregivers to protect the health of their children.”

Bristol immigrated to the United States at age 14, settling with his family in Brooklyn, N.Y. After earning a B.A. in biology at Cornell and an M.D. at Albany Medical College, he completed post-graduate training at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. He subsequently enrolled at UAlbany’s School of Public Health to earn an M.P.H. with a concentration in health policy and management; “I knew public health was an integral part of how I wanted to practice medicine.” Bristol attended classes part time while treating patients at Albany Medical Center and at Whitney M. Young Jr. Health Center. Until 2008, he continued his affiliation with the medical center and taught at Albany Medical College, rising to the rank of associate professor of pediatrics.

“... it’s an ideal time for me to be here and contribute as much as I can.”

Last December, Bristol began a new assignment: chief medical officer at Shanghai United Family Hospitals and Clinics. “I was ready to explore other opportunities in healthcare, including international health; I also wanted to use my M.P.H. in a larger administrative role.” The position offered other benefits, too. “The opportunity to experience a new culture is very exciting. And with China’s commitment to enhancing its healthcare services, it’s an ideal time for me to be here and contribute as much as I can.” Bristol has a four-year contract, “but I hope to be here longer. It takes a long time to see your impact on healthcare.”

His clinical interests include child and adolescent overweight and obesity, and childhood lead poisoning. In his new position, “I’d like to develop our hospital’s adolescent medicine program and see what opportunities exist for expanding care to China’s teens, as well. As in most places, everyone understands that babies need care, but sometimes we forget about the teens and their healthcare needs. There is also a growing obesity problem in China, so I will be exploring that. I think one of the biggest areas to impact is preventative healthcare. As in many other areas of the world, people focus on acute illnesses, but the challenge is helping them embrace preventative care with regular checkups, immunizations, screenings, and so on.”

Bristol is grateful to his “amazing” teachers, colleagues, students and families “for their guidance and support” over the years. With regard to his M.P.H., he adds, “It’s wonderful to be using all the skills I learned at the School of Public Health in this opportunity as a leader in an international healthcare organization.”

He anticipates that some of his greatest challenges will stem from “learning how to deliver care to patients from all over the world; work with an international staff with different languages, cultures and beliefs; and adjust to the realities of practicing healthcare in a country with different standards than I am accustomed to.” But he welcomes those challenges. “It is an opportunity for me to learn and also to be creative in delivering healthcare while trying to enhance standards, if I can.”
CARD: Helping Families Affected by Autism

By Carol Olechowski

Kristin Christodulu and her staff at UAlbany’s Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) have one mission: “to improve lives.”

Christodulu, who earned a B.A. (1990), an M.A. (1998) and a Ph.D. (2000) in psychology at the University, also received an M.S. in sports psychology from Penn State. A member of the UAlbany psychology department faculty, she became CARD director in 2002.

Under her leadership, CARD has evolved “from primarily research to training, education and consultation. We’re very actively involved with the community,” says Christodulu, who also works with 10 full- and part-time employees, eight undergraduates and five graduate students to coordinate programs for “a statewide network” of centers affiliated with other universities. “We use only evidence-based approaches. Often, people in the autism field are selling hope and hype. We are unique because we know that what we offer works.”

Workshops, seminars, training, and local and statewide conferences are tailored for parents and teachers. In the schools, basic awareness training involves everyone, including special educators, bus drivers and librarians. The more advanced “train the trainer” approach focuses on “helping teachers, administrators and other professionals to better meet the educational needs of students with autism. We target areas like improving behavior, instruction and social development,” notes Christodulu.

For families, “we have educational seminars. We’re having one this spring on social development; parents will come, ask questions and get some educational information. For kids ages 7-12, we’ve had programs that combine information and support with recreational activities.” Youngsters often want to know “if autism is contagious, or if a medicine will make it go away.” Brothers and sisters learn the answers to those questions, get to know other siblings who share their experience, and discuss “strategies for support and coping.” Recreational activities, such as Halloween parties, barbecues, and outings to amusement parks and museums, also bring families together.

Columbia-Greene Community College President James Campion, M.S.’79, C.G.S.’05, and his wife, Donna Lynk, learned about CARD several years ago after their two younger children, Robert Joshua, now 10, and Elena, 9, were diagnosed with autism. The parents have attended programs explaining “what autism is and the various kinds of interventions available, and the biological piece to autism.” They also learned such techniques as “telling Robert Joshua ahead of time when I’m starting the snowblower or when there’s going to be a fire drill” to avoid problems that might trigger an “uncomfortable reaction,” says Campion.

The children’s 11-year-old sister, Florentina, has also participated in CARD programs, meeting other youngsters with autistic siblings. “They have a chance to talk, and she knows she has resources,” Campion notes.

CARD has given the family “a better understanding of autism and of the options available to us in the area, and we’ve been able to make some good choices. CARD does a great job. It’s been a real benefit for us.”

Red Flags

Autism usually manifests itself in the first few years of a child’s life, according to CARD Director Kristin Christodulu.

Some red flags that may indicate a child is at risk for an autism spectrum disorder and in need of immediate evaluation include:

- inability to make eye contact; or to wave, point, reach or show
- lack of interest in activities with other people
- making repetitive motions with objects
- failure to respond when addressed by name

For more information, please visit www.albany.edu/psy/autism.
Barbara Fischkin, B.A.’75

“Autism Mom”

Former Knickerbocker News and Newsday reporter Barbara Fischkin assumed a new identity 18 years ago: “autism mom.”

As foreign correspondents, Fischkin and husband Jim Mulvaney covered “murders, mayhem and politics” all over the globe. Their son Dan “spoke English, as well as phrases in Spanish, Cantonese and Tagalog, but lost all his language at age 3,” Fischkin recalls. The diagnosis was autism. Now 21, Dan “is doing very well at saying ‘hi.’” He holds two part-time jobs near the family home in Long Beach, N.Y., and enjoys receiving messages on the Facebook page he recently created with Mom’s help. (Visit www.facebook.com and search for Dan Mulvaney.)

Dan; Fischkin; Mulvaney; and younger son Jack, a University of New England dean’s list freshman and hockey player, are advocates for other families living with autism. The brothers and their dad founded Surf Pals, “which provides free surfing lessons for kids with autism and holds events during the summer.”

Fischkin blogs (“mom.notcalm” for Spectrum magazine’s online edition); hosts an Internet radio program, “Maverick Mama” (www.autismone.org); and maintains the Web site www.barbarafischkin.com.

Fischkin, a Livingston Award winner for Muddy Cup: A Dominican Family Comes of Age in a New America (1997, Scribner), also continues writing books. “The working title” for her latest is Dan the Man: One of the Early Victims of the Autism Epidemic Grows Up, Moves On and Moves Out.
Family, health and people helping people” are the three most important things in life, according to Jordan S. Josephson. Living by that conviction, the board-certified sinus and nasal specialist has built a thriving practice, treating patients from around the world and affording them the same “personal touch” he would ensure his own family.

An expert on CAID (Chronic Airway-Digestive Inflammatory Disease, which includes sinus problems; allergies, asthma; snoring; sleep apnea; and gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD), Josephson likens himself to “a country doctor in the big city.” At the New York Nasal and Sinus Center on East 77 Street in Manhattan, he sees patients from around the world. Josephson is also an attending physician at Lenox Hill Hospital; Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital; and St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital. He is an educator, lecturing and teaching surgeons internationally his technique of functional endoscopic sinus surgery and nasal reconstruction; and a researcher whose work has appeared in more than 40 peer-reviewed journals.

A former member of the National Institutes of Health’s consulting staff, Josephson received an NIH award for dedication and service, and was similarly recognized by the American Academy of Otolaryngology. New York Magazine named him one of its “Best Doctors 2004” as one of 13 innovators in medicine, and he has placed numerous times among “America’s Top Doctors” as compiled by healthcare and research information company Castle Connolly Medical Ltd.

In 2006, Josephson wrote Sinus Relief Now (www.sinusreliefnow.com) to help readers “really understand their problems.” The book “puts the patient on the same page with the physician so that the patient can receive the right comprehensive treatment.” Josephson believes that both Eastern alternative and Western traditional medicines, which are explored in Sinus Relief Now, “have something to offer people who suffer from sinus disease, allergies, asthma” and the other CAID-related diseases. Many of these sufferers “are miserable and are told that they are normal, or that they should live with their problems,” said the author. “But no one should have to suffer, as there are solutions” – ranging from medicines to surgery – “to help these patients feel better.” A “staggering” 120 million people in the United States alone suffer from these diseases, but, Josephson warns, the figure is rising, owing to “air pollution and global warming.”

Josephson also carries his message to the masses “through as many avenues as possible,” including television (“Regis and Kelly,” “Fox News,” “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and “Today,” to name just a few) and radio (appearances on “hundreds of programs,” including with Dr. Mehmet Oz, host of Winfrey’s Sirius XM broadcast “Oprah & Friends”). In addition, he is often quoted in such publications as The New York Times, Allure, Parenting Magazine, Redbook, Men’s Health, and the Medical Herald. Recently named the leading consultant on sinus and allergies for WebMD (www.webmd.com), he plans “various projects” with the Internet site, including “a huge no-smoking campaign.”

No matter which means Josephson uses to assist others, he acknowledges that the greatest reward comes in healing the sick. He recalled the time that Oz referred to him a former “Oprah” guest – a man who’d suffered a nasal injury as a teenager and who subsequently suffered from snoring, sleep apnea and an inability to breathe through his nose. Josephson performed a thorough examination and discovered, in the patient’s mouth, a small cancer that even a CT scan had not detected. He removed the cancer, fixed the breathing and sleep apnea, and the patient is now healthy.

Josephson attributes that happy ending to thoroughness and luck. “A physician needs a good mind, good hands and a good heart . . .”
Presidential Praise

By Gina Muscato

For UAlbany alumus William Thomas, being named Maryland’s 2009 Teacher of the Year has its perks: a new computer, $9,000 in cash and a new $25,000 Saturn Aura. But the biggest reward will be meeting President Barack Obama in April, when Thomas is honored at the White House for his achievement.

The 33-year-old Thomas, who earned a teaching B.A. in history from UAlbany, will be thinking about what he’ll say when he meets the president. Undoubtedly, he’ll leave with a story to tell his students – and another way to make teaching government “relevant.”

“It’s important to reach students on their level to bring them to a higher plane,” said Thomas, who teaches at Dr. Henry A. Wise Jr. High School in Upper Marlboro, Md.

In his own life, Thomas has relied on encouraging influences. He grew up in the small town of Ellenville, N.Y., where his parents, Eunice and George Thomas, instilled in him the importance of education and inspired his path to teaching. While pursuing his degree at UAlbany, he thrived, learning about diverse cultures in history and social studies classes. He enjoyed the University’s diverse atmosphere and the student body, and was also challenged by the high expectations of his professors.

Today, Thomas does the same for his high school students. “I want all of the students to believe that I will not give up on them, that I will push them until they succeed,” he said.

In doing so, Thomas has become a role model, particularly to African-American students – a responsibility he relishes. He dresses in a shirt and tie every day, putting into practice the high standards that he preaches in his classroom. His skills and dedication to his students have brought Thomas several offers to become an administrator in the Maryland school system. But he is unwilling to give up his life’s calling: teaching.

In fact, it’s a family calling: His wife, Nicole Thomas, who earned a teaching B.A. in 1996 and an M.S. in reading in 1998, is a 10th-grade English teacher at the same school. Married in 1999, they met at UAlbany, where they shared an interest in the gospel choir and a passion for teaching. Both were finalists for Prince George’s County Teacher of the Year. William Thomas garnered that honor, then bested seven candidates from other counties for the statewide award.

Still, he maintains he’s not the best teacher – either in the state or in his house. “My wife is the better teacher,” Thomas admitted with a laugh. “It’s not even close.”
For Rebecca Whiteley, joining the Peace Corps fulfilled a longtime dream. “I always enjoyed volunteer work and helping others. I was torn about what to do after college: grad school, the Peace Corps or the ‘real world’ of jobs.” Department of Political Science faculty members Scott Barclay and Thomas Walker “told me grad school is not to be taken lightly – that you should go only if you are certain what you want to do, which I was not. They also told me that I had the skills and experience necessary for the Peace Corps. Their advice was a real help.”

Now 24, Whiteley majored in political science with a concentration in international relations and graduated with honors. A very active volunteer, she was a member of Students at Albany Against Cancer (SAAC), serving as the group’s vice president for a year; and was involved with the University’s Relay for Life, Cornerstone Campus Ministries, and the Capital Region’s Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. Senior year, she interned with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) in Albany. That experience motivated her to start a Preferred Refugees Program to help resettle Burmese and Afghan refugees in the Capital Region.

To join the Peace Corps, Whiteley completed a lengthy questionnaire, submitted three references, interviewed, and underwent medical and dental screenings. (The application process is described online at www.peacecorps.gov.) She then received “an invitation” to serve in the Nisporeni region of Moldova. Whiteley arrived in September 2007 to begin 27 months of service. “Groups of volunteers were placed in villages with families, and had daily language and technical training for the first 10 weeks.”

As a community and organizational development volunteer, Whiteley helps “to assess community needs and assist villagers in solving problems.” She works with two English-optimal after-school clubs; “there is currently no English teacher at the school, but the kids are very anxious to learn!” In addition, she organizes other extracurricular...
activities, such as a summertime project where she “helped the kids paint a map of the world at the local youth center”, a fundraising effort to support the acquisition of Romanian-language books for the school library; and a mentoring club. A series of “planning your future seminars,” which will instruct children in “setting up a family budget, planning a career, writing a résumé and so on,” is also on the agenda.

Each Peace Corps volunteer accrues 48 days of vacation during the service period. Whiteley has traveled to Ukraine, Romania and the Czech Republic, “and I have more trips planned. I consider Moldova my home now. It can be hard to come back to my village, where there is no gas or running water, and there are dirt roads and farmland, after traveling somewhere full of malls, restaurants and Internet cafés. It’s a different world, but I appreciate that I am experiencing it so fully.”

Next November, Whiteley will return home to Phillipsburg, N.J., with her Moldovan fiancé, Costel Sarivan. She hopes to work for a non-profit in the U.S. Whiteley observed: “The Peace Corps has a saying that your service will be ‘the toughest job you will ever love,’ and I think that is very true. It is a life-changing experience to be able to live and work in another country and completely immerse yourself in that culture, and to help people – abroad or at home. It is a serious commitment, but it is worth it.”

Whiteley and her fiancé, Costel Sarivan, model Moldovan costumes at a festival. The couple, who met in Moldova, Sarivan’s native land, will relocate to the United States later this year.

SPH and MI: Combining Academics with Practice

UAlbany’s School of Public Health (SPH) and the Peace Corps have joined forces to introduce the Masters International (MI) Program, which will offer students a Peace Corps experience to complement their master’s of public health studies.

“There are 40-some accredited schools of Public Health across the country, and probably eight of them offer the Masters International Program,” said Center for Global Health Director and Clinical Associate Professor Carol Whittaker, who oversaw the application process that made the rare opportunity possible.

SPH Dean Philip C. Nasca is “extremely pleased to have our school selected as a partner in the MI Program. We join a small and very select group of schools of Public Health offering this unique opportunity for students to practice public health in an international setting while working towards the M.P.H. degree.”

For the program, students apply to both the Peace Corps and the School of Public Health. About six are expected to enroll this year; they will take two online classes this summer to work toward the degree requirements. After spending the Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 semesters on campus, the students will begin the Peace Corps component of their studies, which includes three months of language and cultural sensitivity training, and two years of volunteer work. During a final semester at UAlbany, they “can mentor other students who have expressed an interest in the program,” Whittaker said.

Given the practice-focused scholarship the longtime partnership between SPH and the New York State Department of Health engenders, UAlbany students will be well prepared for their Peace Corps experience, Whittaker observed. SPH is “so different from what we call the ‘ivory tower’ schools of public health. We combine academics with practice.”

– Amy Halloran, B.A.’90
Paul T. Reagan, B.A.’60, M.A.’68, M.S.W.’81

A Lifelong Commitment to Service

After graduating from the New York State College for Teachers, Paul T. Reagan taught English and social studies to seventh and eighth graders in the St. Lawrence Central School District in upstate New York. But “a thirst to see the rest of the world” led him to volunteer for the Peace Corps.

Reagan was assigned to Ethiopia. There, he taught English as a Second Language and social studies to about 200 students, and also conducted adult-education courses. The Ethiopians impressed him; “most lived in poverty, but they didn’t live as if they had hardships. They were hard working, good natured, fun loving – and skeptical about outsiders.” Reagan embraced his work, grateful for “the ability to see cultures I might never have experienced. I took away from the Peace Corps and Ethiopia many friendships.”

In the decades since, the licensed clinical social worker (LCSW-R) has continued a lifelong commitment to service. In the mid-1960s, through the first Peace Corps training program at the University at Albany, Reagan prepared students for service in India. At the Dutchess County Department of Mental Hygiene in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., he worked with severely and persistently mentally ill adults and with the methadone maintenance treatment program, retiring several years ago. Reagan has also trained volunteers for VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America); aided migrant worker families, the poor and the unemployed in western and southern New York; and done needs assessments for community-action agencies in Vermont and New Hampshire. He ran for the New York State Senate in the 41st District, hoping to “make a difference,” but lost to the incumbent. However, Reagan did realize another “lifetime ambition”: completing his M.S.W. studies.

At age 71, Reagan is still helping others. Now a volunteer supervisor with the American Red Cross’ Disaster Services Human Resources System, he offered assistance at the scene of the Continental Connection Flight 3407 crash near Buffalo, N.Y., last February.

Reagan encourages UAlbany students, alumni, faculty and staff to consider volunteering for the American Red Cross, the Peace Corps and other not-for-profit organizations. The rewards, he promises, “will far exceed your expectations.”

– Carol Olechowski

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Paul Reagan smiled for the camera in Nazareth, Ethiopia, during his Peace Corps assignment in the 1960s.