

IMPACT

ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

Responding to a New Reality

by Makayla Hipke

When the Spring 2020 academic semester at UNC-Chapel Hill kicked off on January 8, it was business as usual for MPA students, faculty, and staff. Just eight weeks later, everything would change.

As confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) began to rise in the United States by late February and into early March, universities hurried to respond and create contingency plans.

Universities were quickly determined as possible hotspots for COVID-19 spread; settings posing a high risk for viral contact included dormitories and communal housing, classrooms, lecture halls, and laboratories.

On March 5, MPA Program Director William Rivenbark sent his first communication to faculty about possible COVID-19 impacts and requested that instructors begin preparing for the possibility of remote instruction for on-campus students. Students departed for spring break on March 9. By March 11, university leadership notified students that they would not return to campus after spring break.

To make a mid-semester switch to exclusively online course delivery was

unprecedented, yet universities across the world were being asked to do just that. The challenges for the MPA team were multifaceted: they were attempting to communicate with students, assist faculty, follow university guidance, and care for their own families.



The MPA program hosted an online Happy Hour Hub on April 22 via Zoom.

“The speed in which it happened made it challenging,” MPA Managing Director Heather Duhart said. “We wanted to make sure our students had the information they needed, but the university had to make those calls and communicate them to us. We had to learn to say, ‘We don’t know yet.’”

The MPA program had several advantages that helped ease the transition. Given that the program already has an online option for students, many faculty members have

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DIRECTOR'S COLUMN



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For the first time in nine years as director of the MPA program, I am writing the director's column from home. The past weeks and months have brought extraordinary challenges to our cities and communities. A global pandemic has led to stay-at-home orders, lost jobs, isolation, and economic uncertainty. The killing of several Black Americans, coupled with the disproportionate impact

of COVID-19 on people of color, have left many of us reeling—myself included.

The deaths of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, George Floyd in Minnesota, Tony McDade in Florida, and Breonna Taylor in Kentucky are stark examples of the systemic racism and violence that we must continue to confront in our nation. These problems manifest in thousands of ways large and small in the daily lives of Black Americans. The civil unrest that has erupted across our country is an expression of the feelings of pain and frustration millions of Americans are experiencing. Our present reality is one with exponential difficulties and no easy answers.

As public service leaders, we recognize that many of you are on the forefront of the events taking place across our nation. Your work is critically important to communities of all sizes, every day, but especially in times of crisis. It is impossible for us to truly understand the stress and toll these events are taking on you. We recognize that it is no small thing to choose a career in public service, and we are grateful for your work.

As educators of future public servants, it is not enough for us simply to recognize the problem of structural racism. It is critical that we take concrete steps through our work to dismantle these power structures and make our communities more just and equitable for all.

In many ways, we have made progress over the last eight years. The MPA Diversity Committee meets regularly and works to provide fellow students with space to discuss their experiences. They have hosted a Racial Equity Institute groundwater training event, sponsored a panel on promoting inclusion in difficult political environments, and aim to host a rescheduled Results-Based Accountability workshop in March with Deitre Epps. In addition, more than 200 donors contributed \$51,510 since 2018 in support of the Diversity in Public Service Scholarship and Activities Fund. This fund provides financial aid and programming to prepare recipients to respond to, engage with, and lead in diverse workplaces and communities. Our faculty have been charged to incorporate diversity and inclusion into all courses, and we are preparing to offer a fall immersion course on navigating diverse perspectives in public service leadership. While COVID-19 budget uncertainties have put many hiring efforts on hold, we look forward to filling a new faculty position focused on diversity and inclusion in local government in the coming months.

There is no doubt, however, that we can do more to address institutional racism—in ourselves, through our program, and in our communities.

As I mentioned in a previous column, Doug and Sharon Rothwell gave the MPA program a generous donation that is allowing us to create a strategic plan under the leadership of Professor Willow Jacobson. This plan is providing a roadmap of where we want to be in five years. We recognize that diversity and inclusion must be woven into the very fabric of the entire strategic plan for our faculty, our students, and our curriculum.

While these actions mark a solid start, they are only that—a start. Inclusive workplaces are not created by checking items off a list. We must adopt a mindset that places these efforts at the forefront of every decision we make. I will share more with you in the coming months about ways you can engage with the program in these areas.

I look forward to hearing more from you on the ways the MPA program can do better and how we can better support each of you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Rivenbark". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

William C. Rivenbark
Professor and Director



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extensive experience teaching online. And the program's staff is used to carrying out their work—with students and with each other—remotely.

Another advantage was the MPA faculty's familiarity with thinking creatively about how to deliver content and achieve learning outcomes. Because MPA faculty also work in service to local and state governments, they were already accustomed to the nontraditional academic schedules and teaching approaches.

"There was a true level of care and responsibility from our faculty that paid off," Rivenbark said. "We asked so much of them, and they took it on and made it work. It's a true credit to them."

The challenges, however, were undeniable. While many had resources already prepared for online instruction, others were starting from scratch. For example, faculty member Kara Millonzi had just started a half-semester course designed for in-person delivery, and needed to move it to fully remote—all while responding to local governments' urgent questions about the pandemic and juggling familial responsibilities at home.

"The best way I can describe March and April is 'a whirlwind,'" Millonzi said. "There was a critical period where local governments needed immediate information about the legal implications of COVID-19. I also teach a course that had just started. I was impressed with the students' willingness to roll with the changes and their ability to continue to actively engage with the content under very challenging circumstances."

While class delivery for the online format did not see many changes,

students and faculty—like much of the world—also were experiencing the stressors and impacts of COVID-19. Many were working on the front lines of pandemic response and faced the challenges of adapting to a new normal in their own lives.

The loss of program events was keenly felt. This included end-of-year events like graduation, which was set to recognize 78 new alumni who represented graduates from the past year. Program staff and faculty sought to mitigate the impact of these challenges through online connection and have continued this focus through the summer. The MPA Alumni Board also hosted a special "welcome to the alumni ranks" happy hour event for graduates in May.

As many organizations transitioned to remote work, faced budget cuts, and furloughed employees, students were particularly concerned about the status of the Professional Work Experience (PWE) component of the MPA degree. Thanks to the support of program alumni and community partners—coupled with the perseverance of students—all students secured summer PWEs. Kristin Pawlowski, associate director of alumni engagement and employer relations, and the program were grateful for the efforts of alumni who stepped up and helped make this possible through support positions, providing feedback, and through mentorship.

"It was inspiring to see our alumni community, who themselves were on the front line of the pandemic, still eager to give back to the program," said Pawlowski. "We were humbled to see a record number of alumni supporting current students, and

others offering time to provide mentorship to graduates from the Class of 2020 and peers in the field."

Program faculty and staff are now preparing for the fall semester in the face of myriad uncertainties. What is clear is a commitment to continue to serve and engage our students to the best of our ability and to help as they prepare to be public service leaders.

Elizabeth Langefeld, associate director of academic advising and student life, is relaying one principle message to faculty and students: "authenticity over production value." The focus will not be on perfection but on creating meaningful opportunities to connect, form bonds, and develop shared experiences.

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has created ripple effects that will permanently change how everyone works and interact with each other. The MPA program is no exception.

"We've all gone through this experience together," Duhart said. "It's forced us to do things differently, and I'm curious to see how it changes the program in the long term. No matter what, it's been encouraging to see everyone pitch in to make this work."

While these changes are inevitable, the program's commitment to its mission will remain unchanged.

"The last few months should remind us all of the importance of good public leadership," said Rivenbark. "Our mission is to prepare public service leaders. We will remain unwavering in that commitment."

A Beautiful Mind and a Prime Opportunity

USING A PWE TO BRING A DREAM TO LIFE

by Kathryn Paquet

For Carolina MPA students, the professional work experience (PWE) offers an opportunity to gain hands-on experience in the government or nonprofit sectors. Since enrolling in the program, MPA online student Adrienne Augustus '20 knew she wanted to intern with a nonprofit—she just didn't realize it would be her own.

In the fall of 2019, Augustus fulfilled her PWE requirement by founding A Beautiful Mind Foundation, a 501(c)(3) grantmaking organization based in Hyattsville, Maryland, that aims to fund mental healthcare initiatives in communities of color.

She came up with the idea for the organization early on in her graduate school career, when she interviewed a few individuals who had started their own private foundation.

"I wanted to create my own organization because I didn't want to be constrained by pre-established operating structures that didn't wholly align with my beliefs and goals," Augustus said. Originally, however, she aimed to achieve this goal after obtaining her MPA.

"I thought I would be working full-time for another organization

and be able to set up this nonprofit and run it on the side," she said. But a time crunch to find a PWE led her to a pivotal conversation with Susan Austin, former Carolina MPA associate director of alumni relations and professional work experience.

"Susan talked with me about my career goals," Augustus said. "She really listened to my personal and professional needs. I told her I planned to start the foundation after I graduated, but she looked at my situation and thought way outside of the box. She said, 'Well, why don't you use your PWE to start the foundation?'"

"At first I thought, 'What is she talking about?'"

Augustus continued. "Now I say, thank God for Susan and her thoughtful wisdom. She could have tried to force me into a role that didn't fit my years of work experience and long-term goals, but instead she created a wonderful opportunity for me."

The mission of A Beautiful Mind Foundation is twofold: first, to affect positive change in mental health treatment in racially diverse communities; and second, to narrow the prison pipeline by helping people of color identify the early symptoms of mental illness before they lead to a crisis.



Augustus speaks at the official launch and inaugural fundraiser for A Beautiful Mind Foundation, held October 2019 in North Brentwood, MD.

The organization's work is close to Augustus. Around age 11, she began dealing with depression, despite not receiving the diagnosis until a decade later.

"I had to get myself help in my early 20s, because my family didn't understand," she explained. As she sought treatment for herself, Augustus began to realize how deep the stigma surrounding mental illness ran in her community.

During her young adult years, Augustus lost two close friends, both young African American men, to struggles with mental illness. These losses, coupled with her own experiences, underscored to her that while mental illness affects individuals across demographic lines, it presents unique struggles for people of color. If they successfully navigate past the stigma to receive the help they need, Augustus said, they often face a second challenge: finding practitioners who understand their experiences.

"It was not easy finding a therapist who looked like me," she explained. "And it's not because I have to go to a black female, but because my experience with depression includes living as a black female."

For these reasons, improving cultural competency in mental healthcare is a central tenet of the foundation.

"African Americans are more likely to be diagnosed with a severe mental illness than their white counterparts with similar symptoms, and part of it is because of how we express ourselves," Augustus said. "There are distinct cultural differences in the ways people talk about how they're feeling."



By disbursing grants to qualifying groups and organizations, A Beautiful Mind Foundation hopes to help fund mental health initiatives within communities of color that will both encourage open conversation about mental health and steer individuals in need toward effective treatment options.

The organization launched its inaugural grant-making cycle in late April. By the end of June 2020, A Beautiful Mind awarded 20 organizations across the country grants totaling \$22,300. In July 2020, the organization will receive its first corporate grant of \$10,000.

The organization is currently offering four grants, two of which are especially meaningful to Augustus: Friends of Jelani and Ruth's House.

Friends of Jelani is named for Augustus' childhood friend Jelani, who died at age 24 during a struggle with police in the midst of a manic episode. The grant is designed to fund

programming for men of color aged 25 and younger battling mental illness. Ruth's House was created in honor of Augustus' late grandmother and will provide funding for religious groups to implement mental health programming for people of color.

Although Augustus believes that no one should deliberately plan to start a nonprofit while completing a master's degree—"Why would you do that on purpose?," she exclaimed—she acknowledged that, without founding it to fulfill her PWE requirement, A Beautiful Mind Foundation may not exist today.

Augustus hopes that the organization will be able to help individuals like herself, her friend Jelani, and her grandmother Ruth, who have the power to fight but need support to do it.

"When we have certain segments that are impacted by mental illness and they're not being adequately treated, we lose a huge part of our population that could be positively engaged in their communities," Augustus explained. "There could be fewer people in prison, fewer people out on the street. We could have a better and happier society."

A Leap of Faith

FROM CIRQUE DU SOLEIL TO MPA

by Kathryn Paquet

Enrolling in a graduate program is a leap of faith. But that's nothing new for MPA@UNC student Jeana Taylor, who spends her evenings with a troupe of jumping and soaring acrobats in Cirque du Soleil's "KÀ" production.

Born in Alton, Illinois, Taylor and her family moved to northern California when she was in third grade. She received an undergraduate degree in theater from UCLA and went on to work in film and television, taking a particular liking to comedic acting. In 2008, she received a call from a casting director who had seen her work online. He was interested in booking her an audition for a new Elvis-themed Cirque du Soleil show.

"It was so suspicious that I actually contacted my agent and said, 'Hey, can you find out if this is legit?'" Taylor recalled. "It never occurred to me that they would reach out in such a way."

While she didn't get cast in that production, Taylor was added to their casting database. Less than a year later, she received a call that they were looking to replace an actor in "KÀ," their wildly popular show at the Las Vegas MGM Grand Hotel. This time, she got the part.

She has now been in the role for nearly 11 years. "We have people come who are celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. I've seen a bride and groom in the front row of the theater. We've gotten notes from audience members who brought their kids who were struggling with cancer, and this was their night of escapism. For some people, it's just an hour and a half, and they walk away, and that's it. But for others, it's the most

beautiful, astonishing thing they've ever seen. To be a part of that, this imaginative piece of work, is exciting."

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, Taylor felt shaken by what she saw unfolding around her.

"I saw the election as something that really tore at the bonds of community," she said. "I had this feeling that I was not doing enough—that I could do more."

In 2017, she founded the group Everyday People Taking Action, a Las Vegas-based organization that aims to inform citizens and promote participation in the political process.

The organization's work initially focused on tracking and providing information on the bills the Nevada Legislature introduced during the 2017 session. In the lead-up to the 2018 midterms, the group expanded upon that idea by hosting issue-based political house parties.

"It became, 'Okay, you want to hear about gun safety. Here's a legislator talking about what they want to do with it at the legislative level,'" Taylor explained. "'Here's the person from Moms Demand Action who is talking about what they're doing at the advocacy level. If this is an issue that interests you, here's how to get involved, and here are the people who are working on it.'"

Taylor soon realized she'd found a passion that gripped her just as much as acting. Rather than leaving advocacy to her free time, she decided to make it part of her career. After researching MPA programs, she landed on UNC's online MPA



program. With two kids and a hectic work schedule, the online format was exactly what she was looking for.

"I've gotten online in full-face makeup, my hair in pin curls for class, and then I'll go and get changed and do the show," she said.

Taylor's experience as a performer allows her to bring a unique perspective to the virtual classroom. She can thrive in a fast-paced, ever-changing environment—a skill many public managers are striving to learn as populations grow more diverse and policy problems more complex.

"Theater is unique in that it's a microcosm of collaboration," she said. While many of her classmates are used to working in organizations with formal hierarchies and strictly defined roles, Taylor is accustomed to a more dynamic environment, where thinking on the fly is the law of the land. "The structure they bring is helpful to me, and I think my ability to be flexible adds something for them," she said. "I'm more comfortable living in a chaotic world."

After earning her degree, Taylor plans to explore nonprofit arts management. She sees herself running a children’s arts program or moving into a management role at Cirque du Soleil.

“Public administration is a newer direction for me, and I had to really think, ‘Well, I made art and theater my career because that was my passion, and that’s what I love to do, and that’s

what I could do hours of without feeling like I had done hours of it,” she said. “Why abandon it? I can bring it to the table.”

Life Events

Justin Kreft '16 is solutions architect at Red Hat in Raleigh, NC.

Ryan Davidson '06 is business administration director at General Services Administration in Durham, NC.

Sean Coffey '06 is director of communications at California Policy Lab in Berkeley.

Marcus Reamer '18 is pursuing his PhD at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, FL.

Joy Jackson '09 is senior associate at Institute for Conservation Leadership in Takoma Park, MD.

Larry DiRe '99 is manager of the Town of Federalsburg, MD.

Eric Reese '15 is a data and government consultant in Paris, France.

Marianne Martinez '15 is executive director at Vecinos Farmworker Health Program in Cullowhee, NC.

Lindsey Bineau '19 is budget analyst for the City of Durham.

Camilla Posthill '18 is program manager with the International City/County Management Association in Washington, DC.

Mary Blake '98 is regional director of philanthropy at Children's Home Society of North Carolina in Raleigh.

Jennifer Fox '19 is workforce development senior analyst for the City of Durham.

Andrew Cutler '19 is economic development specialist at the U.S. Economic Development Administration in Denver, CO.

Brian Murphy '20 is data coordinator for Engaging Local Government Leaders in Durham.

Angelica Arnold '17 is development and communications associate at Citizens of the World in Los Angeles, CA.

Brynn Fann '20 is a program officer at Golden LEAF Foundation in Rocky Mount, NC.

Tara Nattress '18 is program coordinator at the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, Environmental Assistance Outreach, in Raleigh.

Whitney Harris '15 is administrative services manager at the Office of Historic Alexandria in VA.

Michael Halford '92 is assistant manager of Gaston County, NC.

Lori Feller '95 is business transformation and innovation executive at Ernst & Young Global Limited in Gaithersburg, MD.

Brandon James '04 is performance audit supervisor at the North Carolina Office of the State Auditor in Raleigh.

Lyman Collins '82 retired as cultural arts manager for the Town of Cary, NC.

Corey Petersohn '16 is budget, innovation, and strategic initiatives manager for the Town of Holly Springs, NC.

In Memoriam: Gloria Grizzle '66

The Carolina MPA program is saddened to share that Gloria Grizzle '66 passed away on June 4 at her home in Monetta, South Carolina. One of six full-time students that encompassed the program’s first class, Grizzle went on to earn her PhD in political science from UNC



and worked in both local and state government before joining the Askew School of Public Administration at Florida State University. She authored more than 80 monographs, refereed articles, book chapters, and books, and taught in MPA and PhD programs

on local government management, public financial management, local government budget simulation, policy analysis, and evaluation. The MPA Program offers our deepest condolences to her family and friends.

For Gloria’s obituary and to leave condolences for her family, visit bit.ly/grizzleobit.



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Congratulations, Graduates!

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Lorraine Allen
Greg Antoine
Jennifer Arnold
Adrienne Augustus
Christy Baucom
Gary Beck
Thomas Bennett
Jennifer Betz
Courtney Cagle
Adam Caldwell
Jordan Cansler
Richard Carey
Nicholas Cerra
Mimi Clemens
Ric Cloninger
Courtney Cooper-Lewter

Charlene Cowell-Prim
Andrew Cutler
Manisha Dass
Carol Davis
Catesby Denison
Jaime DiLauro
Rachel Downey
Brandon Edwards
Ryan Eppenberger
Brynn Fann
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IMPACT

LOOKING FOR UPCOMING EVENTS?

While we've put a temporary hold on in-person events, watch for email invitations to upcoming virtual networking opportunities!