

MSW Student Presents Internship Research at International Trauma Conference in Jerusalem

Graduate School of Social Work student Chana Lazar recently co-presented research at an international conference on trauma at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem based on her success in creating an effective support group for residents of a Brooklyn rehabilitation and residential center during her first year internship.

The two-day conference, "Trauma Through the Life Cycle from a Strengths-Based Perspective," which took place on Jan. 8-10, drew researchers and educators who are experts on psychotrauma and violence, as well as practitioners, international and Israeli students, policymakers and other members of the general public. It was co-sponsored by the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare at The Hebrew University and the New York University Silver School of Social Work.

Ms. Lazar did her 20-week internship last year. Ms. Huggins, who is a Ph.D. candidate in social work at NYU, also served as an adjunct professor in the Touro Graduate School of Social Work last year during Ms. Lazar's internship.

Their research presentation was one of only a select number chosen from hundreds of submissions. It examined how traumatic events early in life are revealed through participation in a support group, and showed how group therapy can enhance recall of trauma, communication, feelings of acceptance and worthiness, social intimacy, and generally help younger trauma victims make decisions about improving their lives.

"I think Chana's work was groundbreaking because she really encouraged the residents to participate and become involved in their own care and to get in touch with their feelings," said Ms. Huggins. "It's very hard to get together a group of younger adults in a nursing home because they're isolated and depressed but that did not stop Chana from consistently encouraging them to join the group. She really did an amazing job," said Ms. Huggins, noting that it was highly unusual for a master's student to present at a high-profile international conference.

Graduate School of Social Work Dean Steven Huberman, Ph.D., described Ms. Lazar as "an exemplary graduate student whose presentation of research at the Hebrew University advanced our understanding of trauma. Chana's research reflected her excellent clinical MSW field work experience at Touro's Graduate School of Social Work."

Ms. Lazar and Ms. Huggins have also co-authored a paper on their research findings that is due to be published in an upcoming issue of the scholarly *Journal of Clinical Social Work*.

Now a second year MSW student, Ms. Lazar came up with the idea of establishing a psycho-educational skills-building group for some of the younger residents at the Brooklyn facility who were undergoing rehabilitation therapy for a variety of serious or life-threatening ailments including cancer, paralysis, multiple sclerosis,



Touro MSW student Chana Lazar with her poster presentation at international trauma conference held at Hebrew University

Ms. Lazar co-authored her poster presentation entitled, "Uncovering Traumatic Events in a Mutual Aid Support Group for Young Adults with Permanent Disabilities in a Rehabilitation and Residential Care Setting," with Camille Huggins, LCSW, her supervisor and the director of social work at the Brooklyn Center for Rehabilitation and Residential Health Care, where

stroke and traumatic brain injury, as well as emotional disabilities such as suicidality, substance abuse and other mental illnesses.

According to federal data cited by Ms. Lazar, 14 percent of the long-term care population in the United States is younger than 65, with adults ages 31 to 64 making up the fastest-growing population in nursing homes over the past 10 years. Younger adults living in long-term care settings more frequently suffer from traumatic events, have very complicated care needs, and experience higher rates of re-hospitalization and unmet psychosocial needs, she said. And research is limited on successful mutual aid groups facilitated by social workers in general, and specifically for this population and their needs, she added.

Ms. Huggins said she decided to submit the findings on the support group to the organizers of the trauma conference because there is so little research in the literature about younger populations in rehabilitation and long-term care facilities and because the impact of the support group was so unexpectedly positive in improving the quality of the residents' lives.

Ms. Lazar, who previously worked in human resources at the Orthodox Union, drew from her personal experience in teaching the rehab residents skills such as resume writing, how to dress and prepare for interviews when re-entering the job market, and how to apply for government programs such as SSI, Access-a-Ride, Section 8 housing and food stamps.

As the residents increasingly began to trust Ms. Lazar, not only did the group grow in size but the residents started spontaneously sharing traumatic events they had experienced during their lives.

"In its inception, it was intended to be a psycho-educational group," said Ms. Lazar. "But then somewhere around the midpoint of my internship, the residents started talking about different traumatic events they experienced recently and in their pasts such as physical and sexual assaults, the crime and drugs with which they grew up, combat exposure, serious accidents, and natural disasters.

"These residents, who wouldn't talk to anybody beforehand, kept coming back every single week to learn something new," Ms. Lazar added. "...They began to socialize and really interact with one another; they began to see that their trauma did not have to define

who they are; they began to realize others were going through the same sort of thing and that they had support from other people; they developed a sense of hope and felt like they had a new lease on life."

Ms. Lazar noted that for many residents, it was the first time in their lives they had an opportunity to process their pain. She and Ms. Huggins utilized the evidence-based practice models of Reminiscence and Problem-Solving therapies to help counsel the residents once they began opening up about their life traumas.

The residents in the support group included a man in his 20s paralyzed from the neck down after he jumped out of his Manhattan apartment building following a panic attack and a 21-year-old man from Queens who lost his leg and shattered the bone in his arm after his foot got stuck between subway cars when he was running away from the police.

One of the biggest success stories to emerge from the support group was a 46-year-old woman suffering from stage 4 esophageal cancer who at the start of the group was very withdrawn and being fed through a tube. "She started to become very talkative and would always say she wants to one day be able to eat," Ms. Lazar said. "Toward the end of the group, her cancer went into remission and she no longer needed to be fed through a tube. The group really gave her a new lease on life and a sense of hope, which helped her fight the cancer. Now she wants to move out of the facility and live on her own."

Ms. Lazar was the only presenter from Touro College at the conference. Other presenters included professors, LMSWs and LCSWs from the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, Brown University and NYU as well as Tel Aviv University and Ben Gurion University in Israel. "I really put my whole heart and soul into the project and presenting at Hebrew University felt like such a huge accomplishment," Ms. Lazar said.



From right to left, MSW student Chana Lazar with her field internship supervisor Camille Huggins, LCSW, and NYU Silver School of Social Work Assistant Dean Helle Thorning