

**DEPARTMENT OF  
SOCIOLOGY/CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

# NEWSLETTER

## Sorensen Named Dean's Fellow for Academic Assessment

Dr. Anna Sorensen was selected to serve as the Dean's Fellow for Academic Assessment for the 2023-2024 academic year. In this role, she will collaborate with faculty and staff in Arts & Sciences to support student learning by developing and implementing effective academic assessment. Dr. Sorensen is pictured (right) with an incoming student at Accepted Students Day in April.



## GREETINGS!

We hope this newsletter finds you well! The Sociology/Criminal Justice faculty and staff would like to share some exciting updates about what has been happening within the department and where we have been focusing our efforts. Enjoy!

## ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS NEEDED

The Sociology/Criminal Justice Department is seeking program alumni to form an advisory board. We want to gather feedback on your experience at SUNY Potsdam, and specifically, within the Department. This feedback will be used to determine how we can improve upon future programs. If you are interested, please contact Dave Bugg at [buggd@potsdam.edu](mailto:buggd@potsdam.edu).

# Bugg Presents at DCJS Public Safety Symposium

Dr. David Bugg was a presenter at the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Public Safety Symposium Annual Meeting in Albany, NY, in September. His presentation "Working with Survivors of Sex Crimes in Immigrant Communities," was based on his research in the field of human trafficking. The talk covered strategies law enforcement can take to develop cultural competence in working with immigrant groups, and future directions for improving victim's services and resources specifically for immigrant communities. The Division of Criminal Justice Services provides direct training to law enforcement and other criminal justice professionals and enhances public safety by providing resources and services that inform decision making and improve the quality of the criminal justice system.

## Sociology/CJS Students Partake in Kilmer Lab



Sociology major and Human Services minor Shashanna Ross '23 served as a Kilmer Lab Research Assistant for Dr. Lauren Diamond-Brown this spring. The Kilmer Lab Program provides opportunities for undergraduate and graduate research experiences by funding SUNY Potsdam's faculty members' research projects. In return for financial assistance, faculty awardees commit to employ and mentor students as research assistants over the term of the award. Ross aided Diamond-Brown in conducting research for her project, "Improving Pregnancy, Birth, and Postpartum in St. Lawrence County." The community-based mixed-methods study of perinatal care experiences aims to understand people's experiences of pregnancy, birth, and postpartum in St. Lawrence County and Akwesasne. The findings of this study will serve as a valuable resource for advocacy and perinatal care improvements.

Shashana Ross '23 organizing survey questions as part of the Kilmer Lab Program.



# Sullivan-Catlin Heads FISU World University Games Sustainability Conference

Dr. Heather Sullivan-Catlin served the FISU World University Games as an organizer of their concurrent sustainability conference, "Save Winter," held in Lake Placid in January and helped facilitate a unique partnership between FISU, SUNY Potsdam, and the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe in Akwesasne.

As they entered the FISU opening ceremonies, nearly 500 athletes from around the world each planted a single red oak acorn along with a personal message. The acorns were brought to SUNY Potsdam's WISER Center greenhouses for germination by Dr. Ray Bowdish, University Instructional Specialist and WISER Center Coordinator, and his team, before being donated to the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe in Akwesasne for a native species arboretum.



WISER Center Coordinator Ray Bowdish and SUNY Potsdam Professor Heather Sullivan-Catlin examine seed trays with newly planted red oak acorns.



Hand-designed stakes by FISU athletes are displayed in seed trays alongside newly planted red oak acorns.

# Sorensen Speaks at Rural Women's Assembly

In December 2022, Dr. Anna Sorensen was an invited speaker at the Rural Women's Assembly in the Catskills. Organized by the Rural Migrant Ministry, the Women's Assembly is a bilingual, multicultural assembly of women and youth from rural communities in New York, gathered together to educate and empower one another in efforts to address systemic inequalities and build sustainable communities. Dr. Sorensen told her story of getting involved in local politics, talked about the role of local government, and encouraged the attendees to become engaged in their community's governance.



Dr. Anna Sorensen served as a panel member at the Rural Women's Assembly.

## van Blommestein Leads Student/Community Outreach Program

In April, Dr. Jeremy van Blommestein spearheaded an event building connections with the local community called "SUNY Potsdam Students Sharing Culture Through Food." Held at St. Philip's Parish Hall in Norwood, students with Caribbean and Latin American roots prepared Caribbean food to share free of charge with community members. Dr. van Blommestein hopes to continue the program allowing students to share their culture and stories with the community.



# Bugg Presents at Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Institute of Texas

Last October, Dr. David Bugg was a presenter at the Leadership Command College, a program that is part of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT). At the event, he spoke about demographics and leadership challenges for law enforcement, extremist groups and law enforcement, and also gave a presentation on improving support systems for law enforcement mental health to a group of law enforcement executives (Lieutenant level through Chiefs). The Leadership Command College is one of the nation's premiere law enforcement management programs and is the most comprehensive program offered at LEMIT. Established in 1987 by the legislature, the LEMIT is responsible for developing the analytical, administrative, and executive skills of current and future law enforcement administrators and executives in Texas.



## Diamond-Brown Leads Workshop at Eastern Sociological Society Conference

In February, Dr. Lauren Diamond-Brown attended the 2023 Eastern Sociological Society in Baltimore, MD, where she led a workshop with Clarkson University Associate Professor of Sociology Dr. Matthew Manierre. The workshop centered on critical perspectives on teaching challenge traditional models of instruction and assessment in sociology, arguing that they impede student learning. Experiences using specifications grading to address some of these concerns and to implement feminist and trauma-informed pedagogy were discussed. Dr. Diamond-Brown encouraged fellow instructors to foster a growth mindset, reward students for engagement and competency rather than mastery; appeal to diverse strength of expression, empower students through choice, and encourage risk-taking and creativity.



## Diamond-Brown Named DEISJ Fellow

The State University of New York named Dr. Lauren Diamond-Brown a SUNY Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice (DEISJ) Fellow. She was one of 15 fellows selected from more than 100 faculty applicants across the SUNY System. During the inaugural year of the program, Diamond-Brown will be responsible for developing DEISJ course resources; offering assistance to faculty developing or teaching DEISJ courses; contributing to the DEISJ in the Curriculum conference, working with the SUNY Center for Professional Development (CPD) to develop a DEISJ course creator's certificate; and, assisting in assessing the DEISJ component of general education. She will hold the position June 2023-2024.

## Cook '13 Speaks at Department Award Ceremony

In May, Michelle Cook '13 returned to her alma mater to speak to Sociology and Criminal Justice Studies students at the Department's annual Senior Recognition & Awards Ceremony. In her presentation titled "How my Education Helped me Serve my Community and Shaped my Career," She expressed the importance of the relationships formed in college, and how those relationships have impacted



Michelle Cook '13,  
Criminal Justice Studies major

her professional life. Cook currently has 17 years of experience working in Tribal government within social services and community/family services programs. After 10 years in the disabilities field, she transitioned to the Community Advocacy Program, where she serves as the Program Manager overseeing the Three Sisters domestic violence program and shelter as well as the Family Advocate Program. These programs are funded through various federal and state grants, all of which Cook is responsible for managing. She has previously served on the Human Rights / Incident Review Committee and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council. From 2019-2020 she participated in the VT Leadership Education in Neuro-developmental Disabilities Fellowship program at UVM and was named one of the AUCD Emerging Leaders in 2020. Cook is also a member of the Alpha Phi Sigma Nu Mu Chapter Honor society through Boston University, where she received her master's degree in Criminal Justice. She was recently selected to the New York State Advisory Board on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Domestic Violence.

## Bryce Vaisey Awarded \$10,000 Taco Bell Scholarship



SUNY Potsdam junior Bryce Vaisey, a Criminal Justice Studies major, has been awarded a \$10,000 scholarship as part of the Live Mas Scholarship fund from the Taco Bell Foundation. An employee at the Potsdam Taco Bell, Vaisey was surprised with the award in April while working his shift. Applicants were required to submit a two-minute video that “showcased their passion and how they are going to use that passion to make a positive change in the community.” Vaisey was one of 1,000 employees chosen to receive a scholarship out of more than 18,000 applicants across the nation. He hopes to use his education “to help pursue his passion of helping others who struggle with social injustice, housing, and healthcare.”

**WE WANT  
TO HEAR  
FROM YOU!**

What have you been up to since you left SUNY Potsdam? We want to celebrate all of your professional and personal achievements and would love to hear about your most memorable moments during your time here! Please share any updates with the department by emailing David Bugg, Sociology/Criminal Justice Chair, at [buggd@potsdam.edu](mailto:buggd@potsdam.edu).

A portrait of Brandon Rodriguez '24, a man with a beard and glasses, smiling. The photo is framed by a blue border.

**Brandon  
Rodriguez '24**

## **“A Key to Freedom”**

Inside an elaborate series of barbed wire fences, guard towers, and carefully monitored living quarters, **Brandon Rodriguez '24** counted down his days to freedom.

Serving time in the Ogdensburg Correctional Facility (OCF), Rodriguez turned to education to free his mind. After long shifts in the mess hall preparing breakfast and lunch for his fellow inmates, he retreated to the solitude of the law library where he fueled his desire for knowledge.

### **Building Knowledge**

As he learned how to file an appeal for his case, he formed a friendship with another inmate, a former attorney and accountant, who gave Rodriguez valuable feedback about a brief he was preparing. “This looks like it was prepared by an entry-level attorney, somebody with actual experience,” Rodriguez recalled him saying.

The encouragement bolstered his confidence and led him to seek additional educational opportunities. He found an old book in the library listing college addresses and phone numbers, so, he typed up a letter, and sent it to 150 different schools inquiring about distance learning options.

His only lead, a letter from North Country Community College (NCCC), informed him that their distance learning options were on hold during the pandemic, but the letter also provided details about SUNY Potsdam’s new sociology program that was in its final stages of development at the Riverview Correctional Facility (RCF).



The Potsdam at RCF program was just rolling out, offering inmates a path to receive their bachelor's degree through the federally funded Second Chance Pell Grant. Eligible inmates were invited to a meeting to learn more about the program, but unfortunately, Rodriguez didn't meet the criteria. After the meeting, he saw Anthony Rufa, the education supervisor at RCF in the hallway. "I was like, 'This is my chance. I'm risking being out of place by approaching a civilian, this is just a bad situation, but I have to get into college.' So, I ran up to Mr. Rufa [to express my interest in the program], and he said, 'No if you're not on the list you're not eligible. You must have at least two more years left in prison.' At the time I only had one year and eight months left," Rodriguez recalled.



Then he remembered the letter he had received from NCCC, listing Dr. Nancy Lewis, a sociology professor at SUNY Potsdam, as the main contact for the program. So, he penned her a letter expressing his interest. It made an impact, and Lewis pulled some strings to get him into the new program.

A month later, Rodriguez was transferred to the RCF, just before classes began. He immediately enrolled in an English and communications class with Dr. Trevor Blank, a theatre class with Rivka Eckert, and a biology class with Dr. Kate Cleary examining zoonotic diseases. "The first semester was incredible. Everybody was helping each other out. I believe that first semester, 13 or 14 people made the President's List," he said. "They were throwing things at us that I had never heard of, and it was just what I wanted."

The second semester, Rodriguez took core classes for his sociology degree, including Introduction to Criminal Justice, and Sociology of Mental Health. He worked closely with Dr. Lewis, who proved to be his greatest mentor. "I can't even find words. She's a force. She's done so many things for me and the program," he said. "I would look forward to her coming into the prison, just to have a conversation with her, to see how she's doing and see how things were building in the program."

One of the top students in the program, Rodriguez worked with Lewis to form an academic enrichment committee, helping to open lines of communication between corrections officers, faculty, and students. The committee was able to get a white-board for students to use in their housing unit, allowing them to discuss topics

from their courses in study groups, without having to go back to the education center.

“The sociology program has been really good because you can be reflective on your social background, where you come from, and how it relates to the system. You can reflect on that introspectively and understand, ‘Wow there were a lot of forces stacked against where I’m from,” he said. “I started selling drugs when I was young. I also sold guns when I was older. The environmental influences had a big impact, and I believe that if I grew up in different circumstances, I would have seen better opportunities, but of course, I made horrible choices to end up in prison.”

## **Trouble with the Law**

Raised by a single mother in Brooklyn, N.Y., Rodriguez had the deck stacked against him from a young age. His mother was dealing with the physical and mental side effects of multiple sclerosis, including depression, which made it difficult for her to effectively provide for her son. “She couldn’t walk or drive by the time I was 12 years old. It was hard. To keep up with everything, I started selling drugs. She was getting disability, which was around \$800 per month, but it was tough, we didn’t have food.”

When he traveled from Brooklyn to Queens to attend Scholars’ Academy every day, he witnessed a stark contrast between life at school and his situation back home. “There were economic disparities between where I went to school and my home. I went over to friends’ houses, and they lived on beachfront properties on Rockaway Beach, and a lot of my peers at the school had a lot of money. That was one of those moments when I realized, ‘Wow, we’re in a bad spot,’” he said.

Rodriguez started selling drugs in middle school and continued throughout high school until he was arrested. When he was released, he tried to turn his life around. At 19, he enrolled in a construction management and civil engineering program at New York City College of Technology, landed a full-time job installing custom glass at buildings throughout Manhattan, and welcomed a daughter into the world. But he was still on parole and was required to meet with a parole officer at designated times.

“I went to college for a short period of time, until I got in trouble with probation. There were stipulations with probation and parole, and it didn’t matter if you were attending college or working, if they told you to come on a specific date, you had to come on that date. They recently passed a law changing that. But I was on financial aid, I was working, I had a daughter, and I couldn’t go,” Rodriguez explained.

He was summoned to court for the parole violation where he presented his class schedules, letters from professors, and time sheets from work, but unfortunately, it wasn't enough. The judge was unyielding in his decision and sentenced him to a year at Rikers Island, New York City's largest jail notoriously known for its violence. "The court bailiff—I won't forget this, either—he said, 'I've never seen anything like that,'" Rodriguez said, referring to the harsh sentencing.

He missed his daughter's first birthday, and when he was released a year later, he struggled to get back on the right track. "There was no reintegration, especially on Rikers Island. There were no programs," he said. "I tried to get back to work, but that didn't really work out. I started to see that people denied me for my criminal background, and I ended up going back to selling drugs. That's when I ended up selling arms as well. I was like, 'You know what, if I'm a criminal now, I might as well just be a criminal. It was a bad mentality to have. It was horrible.'"

On his way to visit his grandmother one day, he was pulled over during a routine traffic stop. The police found drugs and a loaded firearm in his car. He was taken into custody on charges of criminal possession of a weapon and criminal possession of a controlled substance. "When I got arrested, I told myself immediately, 'That's it, I'm not selling drugs anymore,'" he said.

Rodriguez was out on bail for two years, but decided not to go to trial, and instead accept a plea deal that sent him to prison for three and a half years. After short stints downstate, he was sent to Ogdensburg, N.Y., where he spent his sentence behind bars at OCF and RCF.

## **Redemption through Education**

In the fall of 2021, with Rodriguez halfway through his sentence, he had the opportunity to pursue a bachelor's degree in sociology through SUNY Potsdam's new program at RCF.

**"ONCE I WAS MENTALLY STIMULATED IN THERE, IT WAS LIKE SOMEBODY GIVING YOU A KEY TO FREEDOM," HE SAID. "I WORKED IN THE LAW LIBRARY DILIGENTLY. I MADE IT MY JOB. I WAS THERE EVERY DAY, FOR EIGHT HOURS."**

**- BRANDON RODRIGUEZ '24**





For the next year and a half, he poured all his energy into his academics—becoming a leader for other inmates in the program as a tutor, and a teaching assistant in several classes. “We created this academic culture that was a stark contrast from any other prison unit I’d ever been in. I would be at this end of the unit and then somebody would be like, ‘Oh man,

when you’re done, come help me over here.’ I was helping everybody with writing, reading and statistics. It was great,” he said. As part of an Introduction to Anthropology course with Dr. Alan Hersker, interim provost at SUNY Potsdam, he was able to reflect on his time in prison through one of his assignments.

“I ended up writing a short ethnography about my time at Riverview Correctional Facility and specifically my time in the program. You’re given all these tools to reflect on your current circumstances. I was so grateful for that,” he said. In January 2023, Rodriguez was released from prison, and rather than return home to New York City, he remained in Northern New York to finish his degree at SUNY Potsdam. Dr. Blank met him outside the prison the moment he stepped outside as a free man and gave him a ride to Potsdam. Dr. Lewis helped him secure housing and connected him with the Unitarian Universalist Church in Canton, which provided him with financial support for the security deposit at his new apartment. He also met up with Dr. Blair Madore, a professor in the mathematics department, who took him for a hike during his first day out of prison.

“It’s been great. I took a little time to feel comfortable in my own skin again. It’s funny to look back at how uncomfortable I was those first couple of weeks. I still am uncomfortable in certain ways, and in other ways, I’ve changed and I’ve grown,” he said.

During the Spring 2023 semester, Rodriguez attended classes in person at SUNY Potsdam, with a completely different cohort of students. With one year left in the program, he has been lining up hands-on learning opportunities, like an internship with the Ford Foundation this summer in New York City. After two interviews with a panel of employees at the company, he was offered an internship with the Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Justice team, which, among other things, focuses on issues of

mass incarceration. “They’re the philanthropic arm of Ford, a global charity. They work with smaller non-profits and fund them. I’ll be working with them, probably in grant writing for these smaller foundations,” he said.

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After he graduates in the Spring of 2024, Rodriguez plans on attending law school and building on the skills he’s acquired from his professors at SUNY Potsdam as he helps people navigate the judicial system. “Education is empowering, and knowledge is empowering,” he said. “I’ve had a bunch of mentors who are incredible people and I’ve been given some great opportunities.”



*Article and photos by Jason Hunter*



# LETI Graduates 2022 Cohort

In December 2022, the Law Enforcement Training Institute (LETI) celebrated a new cohort of graduates from the program. Program Director Sonny Duquette, Chief of University Police Shane Ashley, Associate Director of the Loughheed Center for Applied Learning Toby White, and Sociology/Criminal Justice Department Chair Dr. David Bugg were on hand to welcome the graduating class.





# Potsdam@RCF Program Finds Continued Growth

Potsdam@RCF is a partnership between the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and SUNY Potsdam. It is striking that two very different institutions with different cultures can work together to achieve shared goals, but that is what's happening locally, across the state, and the nation as federal and state funding is now available to provide financial assistance allowing people who are incarcerated to pursue college studies. SUNY Potsdam is leading the way by providing the Potsdam experience at Riverview Correctional Facility (RCF), a men's medium security prison in Ogdensburg, New York.



Dr. Nancy Lewis mentors incarcerated students at Riverview Correctional Facility

Potsdam@RCF, SUNY Potsdam's college in prison program, will soon begin its sixth semester offering full-time studies leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in sociology and a minor in Human Services. Students studying at RCF complete the same degree requirements taught by the same professors as students on the SUNY Potsdam campus. The College and prison continue to build multi-leveled partnerships and this summer students will have the opportunity to complete 50 hours of study to receive the Certified Peer Recovery Advocate (CPRA) designation. Students will complete 500 hours as peer mentors working with incarcerated individuals in prison treatment programs to gain their certification as a Peer Recovery Advocate.

Scholarly research clearly demonstrates the value of providing college education to people who are incarcerated which our partners are seeing firsthand with lower recidivism rates of people who pursue post-secondary studies while detained. A recent study of Bard College in Prison students found that with every credit hour of study, the person's risk of returning to prison is reduced, culminating in a 0% recidivism rate for those who completed a Bachelor of Arts degree. (Denney & Tynes, 2021) However, recidivism is not the only benefit of providing post-secondary education to those confined to prison. Like students on the main campus, college studies in prison give people an opportunity to prepare for careers that will create security and stability for individuals, families, and communities. College studies in prison build safer communities, healthier families and "engaged global citizens" in the prison and in the "free world."

The SUNY network is a national leader in building and maintaining college in prison partnerships across the state. With the appointment of SUNY's 15th Chancellor, B. King Jr., college in prison partnerships have received even more support. Chancellor King has made clear his belief in the transformative potential of education and his commitment to delivering education to all.

SUNY Potsdam's B.A. program at Riverview Correctional Facility is continually growing. Currently, there are 41 students registered in the program. During the 2022-2023 academic year two students were released from prison and one has continued pursuing full-time studies on campus. Two more students will leave prison this summer, and plans are in place for them to continue their studies in the community.

Potsdam@RCF is the only B.A. program offered by a SUNY school in a men's medium security prison. The Department of Corrections recently instituted a practice of transferring incarcerated students who have completed 60 credit hours in other college programs to RCF, allowing more individuals to complete their bachelor's degree while incarcerated. The new practice supports Superintendent McAuliffe's goal of enrolling all incarcerated at Riverview in a college program.

## Academics on the Inside



2023 Sociology Departmental Scholars  
Andre Jon-Hope (left) and Shawn Granger.

The Potsdam@RCF students are proud of the strong academic culture they built within the prison walls. Program participants share one dorm and hold study and tutoring sessions in the common room. While the students might not have access to computers or a full library, they succeed academically by reading textbooks, taking notes, submitting assignments, and completing examinations. Few students ask to hand in late assignments and students who are falling behind are encouraged by the others to step up. With such strong work ethics, 25-35% of Potsdam@RCF students earn academic honors on the President's or Dean's list each semester. In fact, this spring the Department of Sociology/Criminal Justice named two RCF students, Andre Jon-Hope and Shawn Granger, Sociology Departmental Scholars for holding the highest GPA in the major and the Canfield Scholarship was awarded to a Potsdam@RCF alum Brandon Rodriguez.

SUNY Potsdam will soon hold its first commencement ceremony at RCF. On October 27, 2023, six students will cross the stage and be honored for their hard work and perseverance. Friends and family of the graduates, fellow Potsdam@RCF students, SUNY Potsdam and St. Lawrence University faculty, President Smith and the leadership team, the Commissioner of Corrections, and fingers crossed, Chancellor King will attend the ceremony this fall.

## What Comes Next?

Potsdam@RCF looks forward to continuing growth in the upcoming academic year. A new computer lab will be built where students will learn to use Microsoft software, improve their information literacy skills, and use word processors and printers to produce professional quality reports and resumes.

More first year and transfer students are expected to join the program in 2023-2024, with the possibility of 60 participants in total. Students will be released to the community and will continue their college education, find meaningful jobs, and build families. Watch for these proud SUNY Potsdam alumni because like you, they will move mountains by changing opinions, policies, and laws.

The next step for SUNY Potsdam is creating a supportive housing program to assist students following release from prison. Housing is the lynchpin of successful re-integration, which is especially the case for students wanting to continue their education. With this program in place, committed students who have been released will be offered the resources for continued success in completing their education. For more information regarding the housing program or if you would like to donate, please visit [gofundme.com/f/second-chance-scholars](https://gofundme.com/f/second-chance-scholars).

## What Can You Do to Help?

Many Potsdam@RCF students return to communities that are fragile due to combination of financial struggles, poor employment opportunities, and limited housing infrastructure. Help by sharing your local network of employers, professional contacts, and landlords willing to rent to someone formerly incarcerated and waive the security deposit (at least for the short term). Assisting recently released alumni acquire professional clothing, furniture, and food staples is instrumental to their reintegration. If you are interested in helping Potsdam@RCF students transition as they move forward in the community, please contact Dr. Nancy Lewis at [lewishnl@potsdam.edu](mailto:lewishnl@potsdam.edu).

## DONATE TO POTSDAM@RCF

SUNY Potsdam's Second Chance Pell college in prison program, Potsdam@RCF, established a foundation account to receive contributions. Your gift will make a difference for the students who are working hard to make a positive difference in their lives, and the lives of their family and community members.

Funds will be used to pay expenses not covered by Pell, such as:

1. Supporting students when they return to the community to continue their college education, i.e., scholarships.
2. Purchasing equipment and supplies, i.e., computer, AV technology, and library resources.
3. Celebrating student achievements during graduation at RCF by covering the expenses for a guest speaker to attend the ceremony.

To contribute to the Potsdam@RCF program, please visit: [www.potsdam.edu/give](https://www.potsdam.edu/give).

Select Designation-Other and add Potsdam@RCF to the Gift Summary box.



# Raising Awareness

A decade after graduating from SUNY Potsdam, an alumnus gives back by helping keep the community safe

Januaries are designated National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, but the message resonates across the annual calendar—human trafficking is a threat that must be taken seriously, and nowhere is entirely safe. There are an estimated 28 million victims of human trafficking worldwide at any one time, according to the U.S. Department of State. While St. Lawrence County is not at particular risk, **Chris Chandler '13** has dedicated years to stopping this global crime in the North Country before it gets started.

Chandler, a human trafficking liaison and senior caseworker with St. Lawrence County Safe Harbour, works at the grassroots to raise awareness of risks and ensure that warning signs are properly addressed.

“It is easy to be naïve and think that human trafficking doesn’t occur locally; it does,” said Chandler, who operates out of county offices in Canton. “With the internet, it’s easy to think that we know who we are communicating with, and we often share more information than we should, which places us and our families at risk. Think about the social media trends that come with answering questions that often reveal personal information about where we grew up, who our siblings are, what our favorites are, things like that.”

Chandler has been a caseworker with the St. Lawrence County Department of Social Services since 2016 and was assistant director of Youth Advocate Programs for three years prior to that, helping reintegrate at-risk youth into the community, supervising a dozen advocates and handling 15-18 juvenile delinquent cases at once.



The recipient of a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology & Criminal Justice, Chandler has been working with troubled and at-risk youth for as long as he can remember, but his work really gained traction a decade ago with the youth advocate program, where he learned to identify risk factors for human trafficking among young people in the juvenile justice system and those involved in abuse and neglect proceedings.

“It’s vital for the public to be able to recognize warning signs and report any concerns to law enforcement,” Chandler said. “Warning signs include an individual showing signs of being denied food, water, sleep, or medical care; a person appearing fearful, timid, or submissive; a person deferring to someone else when spoken to; a person having a dramatic change in behaviors; or a person lacking personal possessions or forms of identification.”

## **Action on campus—partnerships for impact**

Chandler believes vigilance, awareness building, local coalitions and action at the national level have all been important steps to making life safer for the region’s vulnerable. The year 2000 saw the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, followed in 2007 by the creation of a New York State interdepartmental taskforce to address human trafficking, and the 2010 declaration of January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, signed by President Barack Obama and in effect since.

Chandler’s own work as the Safe Harbour human trafficking liaison has focused on building a local committee of professionals to discuss ways the program can best heighten awareness, education, and services in St. Lawrence County. Positive outcomes included a partnership in April 2022 with Dr. David Bugg, chair of SUNY Potsdam’s Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice, to host multiple educational events on the Potsdam campus. Held on National Crime Victims’ Rights Week, the series of talks and expert presentations tackled skewed public views of human trafficking as a third-world problem, featured first-hand accounts from a trafficking victim and offered other insights into the fast-growing criminal industry that exploits the nation’s children.

Chandler’s important work will go on. Born in Sayre, Pa., and raised in Waverly, N.Y., he wanted to try a college experience away from home, and the road led to Potsdam. Rather than move after graduation and start over, Chandler decided he wanted to try to make the world better by starting right where he was.



**"I LOVED THE SMALL-TOWN FEEL OF POTSDAM; THAT'S SIMILAR TO MY HOMETOWN AREA, AND I INSTANTLY FELT COMFORTABLE DESPITE BEING AWAY FROM HOME."**

**CHRIS CHANDLER '13**

"I loved the small-town feel of Potsdam; that's similar to my hometown area, and I instantly felt comfortable despite being away from home," he recalled. "During the senior year of my undergraduate work at Potsdam, I decided I wanted to stay local and began applying to jobs. I've always enjoyed outdoor activities like hiking and kayaking and used to spend a lot of time in the Adirondacks—which is also what helped me decide to stay local."

Chandler's impact extends beyond his job. Like many, he has family members who were affected by cancer. A regular volunteer with Relay for Life, Chandler considers himself fortunate to have served as president of Colleges Against Cancer while attending SUNY Potsdam. He has served as the ceremonies and luminaria chair for Relay for Life, and continues to assist the American Cancer Society with planning and execution of local and collegiate events.

Article by Bret Yager/Photos by Jason Hunter



# Give to the Sociology/Criminal Justice Department

SUNY Potsdam's Department of Sociology/Criminal Justice offers many programs and experiences for students that would not be possible without your support. From field experiences to scholarships, your generosity provides opportunities for students to excel as scholars and citizens of the world. YOU can make a difference in the lives of our students!

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