



Agents of Change

LIFE IN RURAL AMERICA is often idealized, yet rural Americans suffer from mental illness at rates comparable to that of urban Americans. Meanwhile, rural culture values self-reliance, exacerbating the perceived stigma attached to mental illness and creating an even higher barrier to seeking treatment. Those who overcome the barrier face another obstacle: a shortage of mental health professionals in rural areas. In the end, millions of individuals living in rural communities don't receive the support and services they need.

Addie Weaver, a research investigator and adjunct lecturer at the School of Social Work, recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the school seeking new ways to deliver mental health care to people living in rural areas. Her mentor, Joseph Himle, is an associate professor of social work and the director of the Vivian A. and James L. Curtis School of Social Work Research and Training Center at the School of Social Work, as well as an associate professor of psychiatry at the U-M Medical School.

“The challenges in mental health are significant, and the consequences of not meeting these challenges are great,” Weaver said. Her postdoctoral work, made possible by the Curtis Center, aligns with the center’s mission: to eliminate mental health and health care access disparities, with the aim of helping underserved populations live longer, healthier, and more productive lives. That mission, in turn, reflects the longtime aspirations of the center’s namesakes.



James L. Curtis and the late Vivian A. Curtis

“My personal ambition, and my wife’s, was to see an increasing opportunity for people—regardless of race or sex—with poverty conditions in their families,” said **James L. Curtis (MD ’46, HScD ’14)**. Working closely with then-Dean Paula Allen-Meares, Curtis and his wife, the late **Vivian A. Curtis (MSW ’48)**, generously provided the initial funding needed for the Curtis Center to open its doors at the School of Social Work in 2007. In recent years, James Curtis has provided additional financial support, making it possible for the center to continue its mission.

“An individual desire to bring about change doesn’t amount to anything, but you can bring about great change when you work as a larger social group,” Curtis said. “That’s why we created the Curtis Center.”

Providing training, mentorship, and professional development to postdoctoral fellows is one of three ways the Curtis Center brings about change. The center also provides support for U-M faculty—often in the form of pilot grants for innovative, early-stage projects—and for comprehensive program evaluation. This increasingly important facet of social work equips community-based agencies to make informed decisions, improve the effectiveness of their programs, and create efficiencies, all by using information about their services that is collected and analyzed by teams of U-M faculty, graduate students, and recent graduates.

“Dr. Curtis’s investment in the Curtis Center supports the development of new knowledge aimed at improving

the health and mental health of underserved populations. The center also provides vital services to community agencies seeking to evaluate their important work,” Himle said. “His contributions have helped to support 25 pilot research grants, nearly 50 community-based evaluation projects, and dozens of valuable learning experiences for students.”

The Curtises increased their impact on the School of Social Work and the world even further by contributing generous scholarship support for social work students. Just such a scholarship had made it possible for Vivian to attend the school, altering her career course.

“The student scholarships that James and his late wife, Vivian, endowed at the school extend their support directly to our students, supporting our students’ aspirations in profound ways,” said Laura Lein, the dean and Katherine Reebel Collegiate Professor

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—JOSEPH HIMLE

Director of the Vivian A. and James L. Curtis School of Social Work Research and Training Center at the U-M School of Social Work

of Social Work at the School of Social Work and a professor of anthropology in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. “He has touched us as individuals and contributed to our school’s ambitious agenda.”

The Mission Continues

The Curtises have significantly strengthened other areas on campus, as well, including the U-M Museum of Art (UMMA); the School of Music, Theatre & Dance (SMTD); and the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies (DAAS) in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. The couple donated their extensive personal collection of African and African American art, accumulated over decades, along with important memorabilia ranging from photographs, stamps, and coins to quilts and musical recordings.

Their gifts to UMMA included an endowment to support the museum’s African art collection, attracted other major gifts in this area, and sparked UMMA’s transformation into a major center for the study of African art. “Thanks to the Curtis Collection of African and African American Art at UMMA, acquisitions supported by the Curtis Endowment, and other important gifts of art from museum patrons, UMMA’s African collection is now considered one of the finest in the country,” said UMMA Director Joseph Rosa.

Similarly, at DAAS, “gifts of art by Dr. James Curtis and Vivian Curtis have made a lasting difference,” said former DAAS Chair Tiya Miles, the Elsa Barkley Brown Collegiate Professor of African American Women’s History.

At SMTD, the Curtises created scholarships promoting the study of African American music. “Their personal commitment to ensuring that the contributions of African American musicians are researched and celebrated strongly complements our school’s exceptional program for the study of American music,” said Christopher Kendall, the dean, Paul Boylan Collegiate Professor, and a professor of music (conducting) at SMTD.

Collaborating brought James and Vivian Curtis together in the first place. They met while practicing psychiatry and social work, not long after completing their U-M degrees. In New York City, they built successful careers, with Vivian eventually becoming director of social work at Kings County Hospital Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., and James eventually serving as associate dean of student affairs at Cornell University Medical School. He later retired from the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons as clinical professor of psychiatry and director of psychiatry at Harlem Hospital Center. He wrote the books *Blacks, Medical Schools, and Society* (1971) and *Affirmative Action in Medicine: Improving Health Care for Everyone* (2003).

Vivian died in 2007. At 92 years old, James continues the mission they shared. He is currently working to establish a home and social service program for homeless pregnant teenagers and their children in Albion, Mich., where he was raised and has lived since 2003.



In recognition of his contributions as a psychiatrist, teacher, and change agent, U-M awarded James Curtis an honorary Doctor of Science degree at Spring Commencement on May 3, 2014, in Ann Arbor. Left to right: Regent Julia Donovan Darlow; G. Rex Holland, former vice chair of the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA) and professor of cariology, restorative sciences, and endodontics in the School of Dentistry; James Curtis; and former SACUA Chair Karen Staller, associate professor of social work in the School of Social Work