

the **weight** *of the* **world**

The Global Mission Leadership Initiative in Baylor's School of Social Work brings international leaders to Waco, equips them to be agents of change in their native countries, then sends them back out to impact the world.

By Erika Snoberger-Balm, BA '00



Dr. Diana Garland isn't sure exactly where the idea came from, but she knew something had to be done. The dean of Baylor's School of Social Work had been in the field long enough to recognize the overwhelming weight of the world's most stubborn social ills.

Extreme poverty, human trafficking, segregation — concepts foreign to many Americans but all too real for much of the world's population.

And missions, well, Garland was an expert there, too — at least the traditional model: evangelist travels to foreign country, works slowly on building relationships by assimilating (also slowly) into a new culture, patiently waits for the right opportunity to introduce the Gospel, and when it finally comes, fervently and prayerfully hopes that even a few hearts will be open to its message. As anyone in the mission field will attest, it's not easy. And it's not quick. And no matter how long the residency or how deep the relationships, an outsider is still an outsider.

"One of the biggest hurdles in missions is the error of inadvertently exporting our 'American' values, mistaking them and mixing them up with 'Christian' values," Garland says. "In social

work, we know that change best comes from within, whether within a neighborhood, community, organization or country. If you want to get people engaged, you have to light a fire from the inside."

Baylor's Global Mission Leadership (GML) Initiative was created to light that fire, and at the rate things are going it won't take long to reach three-alarm-blaze status. Initially funded three years ago by the Henry Luce Foundation, a generous endowment by Baylor parents Carl and Martha Lindner recently extended the life of the initiative, and the young program is already delivering on the big dreams it was developed to fulfill.



Under the direction of international missions veteran Jennifer Smyer, BA '94, MSW '08, GML identifies global leaders

already rooted in the Christian faith and influential in their respective “home” communities, then prepares them to be catalytic agents of change in countries around the world. Brought to Baylor for two years of academic work followed by an internship experience, GML scholars emerge with a master’s degree in social work (MSW), a credential largely unattainable in the many countries where social work as a profession is rare. Some GML students choose to couple

Smyer, a passionate international missionary for nearly a decade herself, understands the critical role of authentic cultural understanding in mission work. While serving in Northern Sudan after earning her bachelor’s degree, Smyer grew close to a Sudanese woman — a relationship she still describes as her “best friend” — who had earlier in life been victimized by female genital mutilation. As an adult, the woman used her experience to go into Sudanese villages, teaching and educating citizens about the abusive practice.

“The [Sudanese] have an amazing heart for their country, and I was privileged to have the tools to come alongside them,” Smyer says. “Once [native missionaries] have the faith and commitment, they can touch and transform with the love of God in a way we can’t. [My friend] took the [gospel] deeper and further into the culture than I ever could have.”

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their MSW with a master of theological studies (MTS) or master of divinity (MDiv) at Baylor’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary, which require an extra year or two, respectively, of course work.

“The Christian church is already awake to the fact that global cultural issues *are* our problem,” Smyer says. “They’re no longer isolated just because they’re across the ocean. We’re accountable to serve the needs and transform the lives of our neighbors around the world. Through GML, Baylor is answering that call and flexing its already considerable muscle in strategic thinking.”

Before he ever heard of GML, Sambo Klauth was part of a trauma recovery project to counsel and help reintegrate victims of human trafficking in Cambodia, his home country. In a culture where trafficking is prevalent and social work — at least the Western definition of it — is nearly unheard of, Klauth had his work cut out for him. A Christian since 2001 when he met an American college professor who shared the gospel, Klauth longed to form the knowledge and skills necessary to influence the community organizations and government bureaus

critical to impacting social change in Cambodia. Churches, too, were ripe for training, since Cambodian churches until recently focused mainly on evangelism and only dabbled in trying to affect wider social issues.

"I was a Christian, but I didn't know much about Christian theology," Klauth says. "I couldn't make an impact without further education. I wanted to be an advocate in my government, to help [leaders] understand the plight of women, children and other oppressed groups, and how through collaboration we can together mobilize nationwide change. In GML, I learned how to organize a community, how to see and analyze a larger system, and the interactions between systems. I learned how to create positive relationships and partnerships and how to work as a team."

As with all GML students, Klauth conducted an extensive research project during his two years at Baylor, the results of which he has taken back to Cambodia this spring for further study and implementation. While his Western education lends great value to his credentials, it is his heritage that gives merit to his research.

"[Western missionaries] play a crucial role in affecting change — they bring new perspectives to a country, they have unique skills and are very knowledgeable, but they have to learn the language and the culture, and that in itself is a very long process," Klauth explains. "Many require translators and high salaries [relative to the country's economy]. If you equip the locals — the ones who will stay there for the rest of their lives — to work as advocates, it can be as good as, if not better than, western intervention. Just like Paul, who equipped people in biblical times to build churches in their own communities, GML is providing the same kind of evangelism that effectively and immediately touches a country's downtrodden and oppressed."

GML scholars are by definition trainers of trainers. So when Smyer set out to recruit her first class for the program, she knew she needed the best of the best, the kind of people who were tried-and-true, bold and visionary leaders. The kind who already were entrenched in the mission, ready to change the world and not afraid to get their hands dirty. Very dirty.

"I thought a lot about how honorable it is, what they'd [be doing]," Smyer recalls. "To face the vulnerability and loneliness of a new country and culture, and then after two years to return to the vulnerability, loneliness and sheer weight of going home to do the work. They would be returning to countries that face incredibly intense issues."

The GML application process, therefore, had to be just as intense. Calling on her contacts all over the world, Smyer sought recommendations for the innovative, intelligent, faithful and fearless candidates she knew were needed to help the fledgling curriculum take root. But there wasn't a lot to go on. There weren't



other programs forging this new face of global missions. There simply wasn't a precedent. So her students' first exercise, Smyer decided, would be the application process itself.

"I knew there was an important theoretical basis we could offer students, but I wanted to avoid the immediate derailment that would result from them having this experience and then not thinking about how it would work out practically until they got home," she explains. "We built into the curriculum an empowerment for the students to analyze course content and how it applies, or doesn't, in their cultures. In many ways we positioned *them* as experts from the start, and we allowed them to be teachers to us, as well."

GML's appropriately lengthy and thorough application process calls on its prospective students to describe their qualifications in terms relevant to GML's own mission: character, service, calling and strategic thought. For months, Smyer interviewed dozens of references (each applicant must list at least one pastoral and one professional reference) before selecting the five highly qualified scholars that eventually became GML's first cohort.

Biak Sung was part of that first class. Already exposed to the trickle-down effect of extreme poverty in her native Myanmar, Sung had taught hundreds of school-aged children in a rudimentary educational system where even the privilege of attendance was uncommon. With many of her students' parents living hand-to-mouth for a lifetime, Sung knew that each child had only a very short window in which to accept salvation through Christ.

"Telling [children in Myanmar] 'God loves you' is wonderful, but it doesn't feed their stomachs," she says. "After they become adults, it's very difficult to introduce Christianity, and even when





you can, it's easy for them to backslide into the [Buddhist] teachings they grew up with. I prayed for God to open a door, and He did."

Through a chance meeting in Singapore with Tom Ogburn, senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Sung found GML and the chance to bring social work ideology and processes first to a refugee group in the U.S. and eventually back to her home in Myanmar. Ogburn and his congregation, whose leadership and financial support have been instrumental in GML's startup years, currently host Sung in her internship working with local Burmese refugees in Oklahoma City.

Make no mistake; the program's inception didn't come risk-free. When Garland initially bounced the idea off other university deans and colleagues around the country, there was one unanimous concern: that the students, once in America, might not want to go back. But the opposite has proven true. Not only have GML scholars shown profound commitment to serving their home countries, Garland says in some cases they've inspired other international students in the U.S. to return home themselves in an effort to effect change using their own Western education.

"My dream is that someday this program will be not only in the School of Social Work, but that we will be bringing in and training national leaders in education, engineering, medicine and more — and why not?" she says. "I would love to see this become a way of life for us at Baylor — to build the church around the world by way of all academic disciplines."

Joshua Tan, a GML scholar originally from Malaysia, recently arrived in Singapore to work alongside the 800-900 other social workers in a country whose rising need for social services demands closer to 2,000 of them. His internship focuses on elders in poverty, who represent the largest demographic of that country's poor. Passionate in seeking long-term, practical and culturally sensitive solutions to alleviate poverty in Southeast Asia, Tan works at a senior center that houses approximately 600 elders in need who have either been abandoned by their children or who have none. Tan's role is to drive and coordinate volunteers to serve his clients. But volunteerism in Singapore isn't a socially

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"Social work is a truly international community," she says. "I learned to open my mind and that to serve people where they are, they must be accepted where they are. I can see how God has used me to connect people through language, which is the heart of any people. When we present the gospel according to the correct cultural perspective, it allows us to skip right over many of the barriers that once were there. We can present the richness and fullness of the Gospel in a way that opens people up to receive the spiritual and emotional healing they so desperately need."

From the first flicker of an idea, Garland knew GML's potential — that its architecture, ideally, would be able to propagate itself and reinvest its own assets, time after time, into a worldwide network of "native" missionaries. Not only that, but it would position Baylor to develop deep and genuine connections in perpetuity at locations across the globe.

emphasized activity like it is in the United States; whereas approximately 80 percent of Americans have volunteered in the past 12 months, less than 25 percent have done the same in Singapore.

"It is a very real challenge for social services agencies to turn [volunteerism] into a social priority," Tan says. "Culturally it is not common for people to volunteer, but I believe it is a key part of answering the larger questions of poverty in Southeast Asia. Singapore is one of the wealthier countries, so if I can help mobilize volunteers in this region and aid in developing a duty of philanthropy within our culture, it will be an important piece of sustainable development here."

Before traveling to the U.S. for GML, Tan read up extensively on American culture and communication. While it took some time to feel comfortable, not much fazed him in his new surroundings, but he did discover one unexpected quality at Baylor that helped him feel right at home.

"I always saw Americans as pursuing more of their own individual efforts," he says. "Asian culture, I thought, is more communal — we eat together, hang out together, work together as a team."

Not long after he stepped on campus, Tan was happily surprised to find his early assessment debunked. He says the multidisciplinary atmosphere at Baylor quickly brought him together with students from biology, psychology, marketing and even military backgrounds. He cultivated relationships that were mutually beneficial from an academic standpoint, shared world views and had plenty of laughs in addition to learning.

Smyer, along with her role as GML advisor, is tasked with building an early support system among GML scholars both through one-on-one interaction and by her leadership of a weekly, cross-cultural seminar integrating GML students' academic, cultural, social and spiritual experiences while at Baylor, and how those experiences will be applied beyond their time in Waco. Though any Baylor student can register for the course, Smyer initially was surprised at its popularity with non-GML students.

"There have been 12-13 [students] enrolled each semester since its offering, and it's been an awesome experience each time," she says. "I've witnessed each student's world grow as they've learned to understand the value of collaborative learning. It's developed their cross-cultural understanding, their strength of identity and their confidence in their own abilities."

Smyer watched during two years as the cohort of five branched out into many areas at Baylor, developing genuine collegiality, getting together on weekends and even worshipping together. And Garland, whose brainchild already has surpassed her most hopeful outcomes (in the beginning, she deemed success a 50 percent rate of program completion; GML's first class graduated 100 percent of its students), couldn't be prouder.

"They're such an inspiration, each one of them," she says. "God is at work, and His work shines through the imperfections in our world and the imperfections even within ourselves. These students took control of their own education and squeezed out every opportunity for learning. They have a deep seriousness, and they recognize what a gift it was, the time we spent together. They are now beginning meaningful missions engagements, and I have no doubt it is they who will be sending us the next wave of scholars so we can multiply the work that's being done through GML."

Fanning a flame

A transformative fire, kindled at Baylor, is spreading throughout the globe. Graduates of the Global Mission Leadership Initiative are returning to their native countries to address the most urgent needs in their hurting communities: Human trafficking in Cambodia, education in Myanmar, impoverished senior citizens in Singapore. And through it all, these Baylor graduates are offering hope to people whose circumstances may appear hopeless.

Your help is needed to fan the flames. An education from the Baylor School of Social Work's GML Initiative equips these students to change lives.

Baylor parents Carl and Martha Lindner recognized the Initiative's potential to minister to people in need, and their generosity has kept the program alive. But your support is still needed to bring future students to Baylor and receive the training they need to become powerful agents of change. Without financial assistance, the burden of tuition and transportation costs between Baylor and their home country are too great for them to bear. Scholarships enable students to rewrite the future for those in need, and your provision helps to bring these stories to life.

Your gift to the Global Mission Leadership Initiative truly makes a world of difference. To learn more about how you can support these students, contact Kristen Box, Director of Development, at Kristen_A_Box@baylor.edu or call (254) 710-2561.