I need you to know that you and your daughter are some of the most brave and resilient people I have ever met. There aren’t enough words to explain how much I admire your courage.

I also need to apologize on behalf of the United States of America. I am sorry that you have been degraded and humiliated by Americans. I am sorry that border patrols officials asked if you were infected with any diseases as if you were some animal. I am sorry that an agent told you to pick up your trash as he pointed down at your daughter while she slept. You and your daughter do not deserve to be treated in such a sanitizing way for simply seeking survival.

Marianna Hernandez, M.S.W. ’19, one of the students who visited the Texas-Mexico border, authored the powerful letter she wrote to a refugee mother she helped counsel. Read the full letter here.

THE PROBLEM SOLVERS

From Westwood to the Texas-Mexico border and Haiti, UCLA people are tackling global inequities, one heartfelt step at a time.

By Patty Park ’91 • Photos by Austin Hargrave
YOU KNOW THE SAYING: “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” So be part of the solution. Don’t watch from the sidelines.

Fueled by compassion, vision, determination and, of course, the brilliance for which Bruins are known, UCLA scholars and faculty are everywhere but on the sidelines. Far from content to identify problems, they are in our backyard, on our streets and across the globe, doggedly pursuing answers to some of the most pressing social justice and human rights questions.

How do we reduce health care disparities? Why are our neighbors suffering from inhumane treatment? How can we leverage our knowledge and research to improve this world?

They’re already moving the needle. And they know the answers to these daunting issues don’t materialize as a magic formula or algorithm, but in the powerful act of serving the community — one person at a time.

The odd but extraordinary thing about these problems is that, while they may happen across the globe, they also happen in our backyard, on our streets. And they are unique to people in our community.

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A Small and Fierce Team

For 12 hours a day, the group heard heartbreaking stories. “I came here because, if not, I was going to die, be killed or be recruited for a gang,” Garcia recalls being told. The accounts they heard — a mother who nearly drowned while clutching her baby, and a family held in Mexico for 12 hours — shared a theme: We fl ed because we had no choice.

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CRISIS ON THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER

“This is a social justice issue and a child welfare issue,” says Sergio R. Serna, a field education faculty member of the UCLA Department of Social Welfare at the Luskin School of Public Affairs. “People are being robbed of their rights in the United States.”

In February, Serna — along with Ayako Miyashita Ochoa, UCLA Luskin adjunct faculty member and co-director of the UCLA Hub for Health Intervention, Policy and Practice; Angela Garcia M.S.W. ’19; Fatima Gonzalez M.S.W. ’19; Marianna Hernandez M.S.W. ’19; and Anthony Gómez — spent a week at the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas. It is the country’s largest detention center for women and children seeking asylum.

The Bruins were there as volunteers for the Dilley Pro Bono Project, part of the national Immigration Justice Campaign, to provide legal services to mothers and children who have crossed the border into the U.S. from Central America and elsewhere.

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The volunteers helped families prepare for their “credible fear” interview, during which they would need to convince an immigration officer that they faced a real threat of persecution back home.

When the team returned home, they received news that some of their clients had passed the credible fear interview. They also heard that because of their work identifying children under the age of 1, a complaint was filed with the Department of Homeland Security, and 15 families with babies were released.

They are now collaborating with the Los Angeles Human Rights Initiative to seek ways to conduct remote screenings for asylum seekers away from the border.

Dethumanizing People

In September, Serna and Gómez presented at the Latino Mental Health Conference, proposing that trauma care should be part of legal advocacy work. In 2020, the team will attend the Society for Social Work and Research conference to address immigrant detention issues with research faculty from universities nationwide.

“We are dehumanizing people based on their countries of origin, their race and the color of their skin,” Gómez says. “These people have a human right to survive and give the best life they can to their children. Who are we to say, ‘No, you can’t do that?’”

Inspired by the resilience of women who have traveled great distances to protect their families, the team continues to make an impact. Three of the students graduated in June. Garcia is a pupil services and attendance counselor for the Los Angeles Unified School District, working with many students who are new to the country and struggling to adjust. Gonzalez is working to be a psychiatric social worker at the Hollywood Department of Mental Health, and Hernandez is a prevention specialist at the Community Coalition in South L.A.

Gómez, who graduates in 2020, plans to pursue a Ph.D. in social work. “Fear has no place in mediating humanity, and we cannot settle — now or ever.” Gómez says. Adds Serna, “I won’t gain satisfaction until all the detention centers are closed in the United States.”

MAKE YOUR IMPACT. The Los Angeles Human Rights Initiative is a student-run, faculty-supervised UCLA organization that provides pro bono forensic evaluations to asylum seekers and other immigrants. Students in health profession–related graduate schools, licensed clinical social workers or those with D.O., M.D., N.P. or Psy.D. degrees are able to volunteer on cases. If you don’t fit this description, you can still volunteer in areas such as research, advocacy and more. Visit lahumanrights.org/volunteer.
EVERY CHILD DESERVES TO HAVE A DENTAL HOME AND ONE THAT WILL HELP TO PREVENT PROBLEMS FROM HAPPENING.

— Daniela Silva

BIG NEED FOR SMALL PATIENTS

“My dream is to stop caries disease from happening to little ones,” says Daniela Silva, chair of the Section of Pediatric Dentistry at the UCLA School of Dentistry and director of the school’s pediatric residency program. “Every child deserves to have a dental home and one that will help to prevent problems from happening.” Early childhood caries, better known as tooth decay or cavities, is the No. 1 chronic, yet totally preventable, disease in children. The pain can make it difficult for a young child to eat, sleep or go to school. A child can even end up in the emergency room.

Yet pediatric dental care is not easily accessible in every community. To address the oral health disparity, the UCLA School of Dentistry operates two pediatric dental clinics and partners with other clinics throughout L.A. to bring smiles to the children and families most in need.

A Little Child in Extreme Pain

Silva still remembers the 4-year-old girl who was brought to the UCLA Children’s Dental Center in Westwood in extreme pain. She needed emergency care but had no resources. “We treated her immediately,” Silva says, “because we try to provide care for everyone who knocks on our doors.”

In 2018-19, the Westwood clinic — which reopened after undergoing a massive renovation — administered nearly 6,000 visits. Nearly 2,000 visits were administered at the school’s pediatric dental clinic at the Wilson-Jennings-Bloomfield UCLA Venice Dental Center.

Both clinics play a critical role in the community, as 85% of the patient population is comprised of low-income and underserved families, many living 250% below the poverty level. Both clinics also provide general anesthesia, which is vital for young patients who are medically compromised or frightened of dentists.

The clinics follow the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry guidelines that every child should have visited a dentist by age 1 or when the first tooth appears. According to Silva, it’s not uncommon to see patients as young as 3 with severe tooth decay in 16 out of 20 baby teeth. “We see a lot of families with low health literacy who never thought their child would have access to oral care,” Silva says.

The UCLA School of Dentistry is currently running a grant-funded pilot program that treats pediatric patients at a South Central L.A. clinic. Here, and at all the clinics, the school’s goal is to not only treat the pain, but also to educate parents and build relationships so that the patients continue to receive dental care.

Every Child Deserves a Dental Home

“When parents come to see our residents,” says Paul Krebsbach, dean of the UCLA School of Dentistry, “they always ask them, ‘How can I make it so that my children are taken care of?’”

“Every child deserves to have a dental home and one that will help to prevent problems from happening.”

— Daniela Silva

Every patient is treated as if they were Silva’s own child, which is why “some babies have even called me ‘Mommy,’” Silva says.

“All the clinics are so important, but the one thing that makes the Westwood clinic so special is that it’s the only clinic with a dental residency program,” Silva says. “Residents are committed to helping the youngest Angelinos establish lifetime habits of good oral health.”

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Serving the needs of our youngest neighbors is a shared vision at UCLA. Through the UCLA Center for Community Learning, undergraduates enroll in academic programs — ranging from one quarter to two years — that engage them in meaningful work throughout L.A., addressing challenges from hunger and homelessness to educational equity and environmental justice. Among them is Jumpstart, a one-year AmeriCorps program that promotes literacy among local preschool students.

Visit uei.ucla.edu/community-learning/.

BENEATH THE SKIN

At the UCLA School of Nursing, one of the country’s top-ranked schools for research, many nurses are also scientists whose discoveries are going from the lab to the bedside — paving the way for transformative healing and patient care.

Case in point: Professor Barbara Bates-Jensen M.N. ’92, Ph.D. ’98, affectionately known as “Dr. BBJ.” In 2010, the wound care nurse traveled to Haiti to direct and provide wound care to victims of the 7.0 magnitude earthquake, which had killed or injured more than half a million people and left 5 million displaced.

“They’d been laying on army cots, many for three weeks before I got there, and in addition to the wounds they suffered from the earthquake, they had pressure injuries (bedsores) down to the bone,” recalls Bates-Jensen, who spent nine days caring for patients. “There couldn’t have been anyone better suited for the crisis. A world-renowned researcher and author on wound care best practices, Bates-Jensen is an expert on pressure ulcers, which largely affect...
immobile persons such as nursing home residents, persons with spinal cord injury and critically ill patients.

Not only is the condition painful, but it can cost $70,000 to heal one severe bedsore, and 60,000 people die from bedsores related problems in the U.S. every year. Another staggering fact: Pressure injuries are 95% preventable.

Driving the Doctor Crazy

“I’ve been frustrated with detecting and preventing early pressure injuries my entire career,” says Bates-Jensen, noting that nurses traditionally identify pressure injuries by observing for skin discoloration. But by the time the redness is observed, the damage is done. The data also shows that individuals with dark skin tones, including African American and Hispanic patients, have a higher prevalence of severe pressure ulcers, because it’s harder to see the skin discoloration, the redness, in dark skin tones.

“This health disparity was driving me crazy,” she says. “We were relying on such a subjective method, visually observing for skin color changes, which missed a whole segment of patients.”

Working with William Kaiser, co-chair of the UCLA Wireless Health Institute, and his colleague Majid Sarrafzadeh, Bates-Jensen invented the SEM Scanner, a subepidermal moisture scanner that’s the first wireless wound assessment device. It was a game changer.

The SEM Scanner measures moisture, or edema, beneath the skin, which is a biophysical marker of early tissue damage. The SEM Scanner can detect early stage pressure injuries up to 10 days before damage is visible. The scanner operates similarly to the seismometers used on NASA’s Mars landing craft, which looks for seismological clues beneath the planet’s surface. Already adopted in the United Kingdom, where Isle of Wight NHS Trust’s Glenn Smith declared that it had changed “everything we know about pressure ulcer care,” the SEM Scanner is now being adopted by U.S. hospitals after receiving approval from the Food and Drug Administration. And it’s necessary: The U.S. health system spends $25 billion a year on the treatment of pressure injuries.

Dr. BBJ says, “It can prevent pressure injuries from ever developing. It even the playing field by detecting damage early in people with dark skin tones and picking up damage in everyone.”

Bringing stigmas and health disparities to center stage, Kia Skrine Jeffers M.S.N. ’10, Ph.D. ’16, assistant professor in the UCLA School of Nursing, combined her passions for both science and art to create an original theater production to help African American women discuss the stigma of depression. With a grant from the California Arts Council, she collaborated with the UCLA Center for Health Services and Society, Healthy African American Families and six women from South L.A. to write the play We See You, Si. Performing to sold-out audiences, it will be coming to UCLA in early 2020. Visit weseyousis.org.

SERVING THE UNDERSERVED

THE UCLA SCHOOL OF LAW Veterans Legal Clinic serves one of the most vulnerable groups: veterans who are chronically homeless or who are aging, disabled or returning from incarceration. “Because of the acute trauma our clients are facing, we advocate and assist where others are able to navigate on their own,” says Sunita Patel, the clinic’s faculty director and assistant professor of law.

The clinic assists veterans in securing benefits and helps them deal with infractions that might affect their access to housing, employment or services. Students recently assisted a homeless veteran with receiving $69,000 in benefits, which were withheld while he was in state prison.

• The Vice Provost Initiative for Pre-College Scholars Program in the Division of Undergraduate Education helps historically underrepresented high school students — first generation, minorities and those from financially stressed schools — become competitively eligible for admission to universities. The program includes counseling, mentoring, academic advising and summer residential programs.

• On campus, programs like the UCLA-HHMI Pathways to Success Program in UCLA College’s Division of Life Sciences work with first-generation college students and those with socioeconomic hardships, life challenges or diverse backgrounds to help them navigate paths to science careers.

• And the UCLA Labor Center — a unit of the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment in UCLA College’s Division of Social Sciences — conducts research on immigrants, young people and low-wage workers, driving policy change that involves minimum wage, paid sick leave and wage theft. All this work is changing society around us — one individual at a time.