

**2025 SOCIAL WORK ALUMNI GROUP (SWAG)
ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

Holistic Approaches to Health and Healing

Friday, February 28, 2025

8:15 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.



SCHEDULE

8:15 a.m. Registration, Networking, Coffee, and Visit Sponsor Tables

8:50 a.m. Welcoming Remarks—Elizabeth Cruz, LCSW

[UTSA Social Work Alumni Group \(SWAG\)](#)

- La Villita Room, Durango Building

9:00 a.m. Lynne Cossman, Ph.D.

[Inaugural Dean, College for Health, Community and Policy](#)

Professor, Departments of Demography and Sociology

Mark G. Yudof Endowed Professor

- La Villita Room, Durango Building

9:15 a.m. Ellie Saucedo, Director of Field Education

[UTSA Social Work Department](#)

- La Villita Room, Durango Building

9:30 a.m. 10-minute break

9:45 a.m. [Keynote Panel](#)

- La Villita Room, Durango Building

11:15 a.m. Lunch and Networking

- River Walk Room, Durango Building

11:50 a.m. 10-minute break

12:00 p.m. Breakout Session 1

- DB 2.302 – [Session 13: Rejuvenating Hope in Social Work Practice](#)
- DB 2.304 – [Session 5: Healing with Sound Bowls: Restoring Balance through Vibration Therapy](#)
- DB 2.206 – [Session 1: Breaking Boundaries: Psychedelics as a Treatment for Mental Health](#)
- DB 3.206 – [Session 14: The Ripple Effect: Understanding Trauma as the Root of Substance Use and Mental Health Challenges](#)
- DB 3.208 – [Session 15: Trauma-Informed Design: Integrating social work practice and architectural innovation to enhance wellbeing through the built environment](#)

1:15 p.m. 10-minute break

1:25 p.m. Breakout Session 2

- DB 2.302 – [Session 2: Building Bridges Against Trafficking: Providing a Coordinated Response to Exploited Youth](#)
- DB 2.304 – [Session 9: Music is Medicine: Incorporating Music into Clinical Practice](#)
- DB 2.206 – [Session 12: Preventing Burnout by Increasing Cultural Competence](#)
- DB 3.206 – [Session 7: Limpas, Ojo, and Envida: Integrating Cultura & Evidence Based Practice into Therapy](#)
- DB 3.208 – [Session 10: No Shame in Your Game: Gaming as a Tool for Mental Health and Burnout Prevention](#)

2:40 p.m. 10-minute break

2:50 p.m. Breakout Session 3

- DB 2.302 – [Session 8: Maximizing Mindfulness Meditation to Manage Stress and Boost Professional Well-Being](#)
- DB 2.304 – [Session 3: Building Community Resilience](#)
- DB 2.206 – [Session 4: Engaging Community Courageously](#)
- DB 3.206 – [Session 6: Let's Talk About Death and Grief](#)
- DB 3.208 – [Session 11: Pediatric Autism Communication Therapy: Empowering Families to Empower Their Children](#)

4:05 p.m. 10-minute break

4:15 p.m. Closing Remarks

- La Villita Room, Durango Building

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Introducing the 2025 [SWAG Annual Scholarship Recipient!](#)

Keynote Panelists

United in Strength: Addressing LGBTQ+ Struggles and Creating Pathways for Healing

In today's divided political climate, the LGBTQ+ community faces significant challenges, from increasing hate and prejudice to the ongoing fight for equality and acceptance. This panel will explore how LGBTQ+ individuals continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity and how we can come together to foster healing and empowerment. We will discuss the effects of discrimination, the need for greater understanding, and the importance of recognizing that being queer is not a lifestyle choice but an integral part of one's identity.

Through personal stories, expert perspectives, and strategies for advocacy, this session will highlight the challenges the LGBTQ+ community faces today, while offering hope and pathways to healing—emphasizing the power of unity and collective action. By focusing on love, understanding, and community-building, we can create lasting change and ensure that LGBTQ+ individuals not only survive but thrive.

Diego M. Bernal (He/Him)

State Representative, District 123



Representative Diego Bernal was born in South Texas and raised in San Antonio. After graduating from Thomas Jefferson High School in the city's West side, he attended the University of Michigan, where he earned his undergraduate degree, Master's in Social Work, and law degree. After graduating from law school, he returned to San Antonio permanently as a MALDEF staff attorney, advocating and litigating on behalf of working people, children, and immigrant communities.

In June 2011, Diego was elected to the San Antonio City Council, representing District 1. Representative Bernal was elected to the Texas House of Representatives in February 2015, representing District 123, which includes downtown and north central San Antonio, parts of the city's West Side, and the City of Castle Hills. He is a strong ally and advocate for the LGBTQIA+ community in San Antonio and across Texas. As a Councilman for District 1, Diego championed the queer community by adding sexual orientation and gender identity to San Antonio's non-discrimination code. As a Texas Representative, Diego has consistently filed bills each Legislative Session, including House Bill (HB) 715 from the current 89th Legislative Session, which would include gender identity as a protected class against discrimination "with or without regard to the individual's designated sex at birth" and allow individuals to sue businesses that refuse accommodation based on gender identity. He has also regularly filed House Bill (HB) 729, which would prohibit housing discrimination against the Queer community and expand protections by adding sexual orientation and gender identity alongside existing categories such as race, religion, and disability. Representative Bernal is an active member of the Texas House of Representatives's LGBTQ Caucus, creating awareness and advocating for the LGBTQIA+ community.

The Honorable Judge Rosie Speedlin Gonzalez (She/Her)

Bexar County Court at Law No. 13



The Honorable Judge Rosie Speedlin Gonzalez presides over Bexar County Court at Law No. 13. Judge Speedlin Gonzalez was born and raised in Brownsville, Texas. After graduating from Homer Hanna High School in 1983, she attended Vermont College of Norwich University located in Montpelier/ Northfield, Vermont and in 1987; she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from St. Mary's University. After working in the field of adolescent social work, juvenile corrections and education for 11 years, she attended St. Mary's Law School and received her Doctorate of Jurisprudence in 2001. From 2002 until November 2018, Judge Speedlin Gonzalez worked as a solo practitioner attorney. Her general practice was eventually stream-lined as a family law practice with an emphasis on Child Welfare and dependency cases. At the time of her election, Judge Speedlin Gonzalez, was the only attorney in South Texas that was recognized as a Board Certified Child Welfare Law Specialist by the National Association of Counsel for Children and had represented hundreds of children in the Texas foster care system. Her background in Child Protective Services, Indigent Services, Juvenile Probation and Substance Abuse Treatment and Education, assisted her in being a highly sought-after Attorney Ad Litem for children in some of the most contentious family cases in recent history.

As an attorney, Judge Speedlin Gonzalez' career was devoted to advocating for fairness and justice for the disenfranchised and the voiceless. She has been, and continues to be, committed to ensuring that women have a seat at the policy-making table of their respective communities of origin. Throughout her career, Judge Speedlin Gonzalez has been recognized for her leadership and community work by various organizations and associations. She has previously served as a consultant to women seeking public office and has been the recipient of numerous awards, which include the Adele Advocate for the Poor Award, the Presidential National Leadership Award, the Bexar County Pioneer Award, the PRIDE Center's Political Icon Award, and she has been inducted into the Order of Barristers and INNS of Court.

Judge Speedlin Gonzalez has served as a Commissioner on the Hispanic National Bar Association's Commission on the Status of Latinas in the Legal Profession and has served on various non-profit and educational boards. On November 6, 2018, Rosie Speedlin Gonzalez was elected to preside over County Court at Law No. 13, which is one of two designated misdemeanor Domestic Family Violence Courts, in Bexar County, Texas. She is the first out LGBTQ Judge and the third Judge to serve on this bench.

Miles Rodriguez (He/Him)

Trans Youth Connect TX

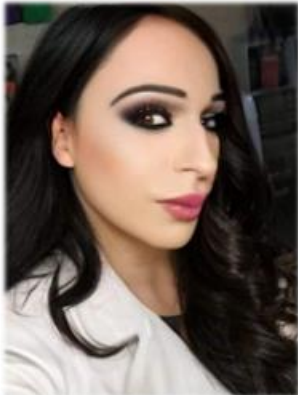


Miles Ren is a passionate Peacemaker and Transgender advocate. At 19 years old, he has now dedicated his life to promoting peace and consistently working to create community with other Transgender people. He founded the organization Trans Youth Connect TX in October 2024, and he is also a Peace Ambassador for the 2024-2025 year with the San Antonio Peace Center.

Miles came out as a transgender man when he was 14 years old and has felt all of the struggles and hardships. His experiences have inspired him to help others and advocate for trans equality and liberation in not only Texas, but for the world. Miles aims to create change in the world, and he hopes that he can inspire others to do the same.

Armani Je Balderas (She/Her)

Rise Recovery



Armani is a dedicated advocate for recovery with a powerful personal story. After years of experiencing jails, institutions, and homelessness, she made the life-changing decision to walk into the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous on June 30th, 2020. This moment marked the beginning of a transformative journey, where Armani gained the strength, confidence, and clarity to discover her true purpose in life.

Driven by a deep passion for helping others in their recovery, Armani now serves as the Telehealth Coordinator at Rise Recovery, where she also leads the Spanish Language Family Group. Her commitment to empowering others through their recovery process reflects her belief in the power of community and personal growth.

Moderator

Eric Alva (He/Him)

Iraq War veteran, LGBTQ rights activist, and diversity advocate



Retired Marine Staff Sergeant Eric Alva shares his powerful story of coming out as a gay man in the armed forces as well as his ardent advocacy for diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

The first American injured in the Iraq War, Eric was hailed as an American hero. While he lost his leg in combat, his spirit remained stronger than ever — upon retirement, Eric came out as gay. As a former spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign, he played an instrumental role in the repeal of the military's "Don't Ask,

Don't Tell" policy on gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members, working with members of Congress to end the discriminatory practice.

As a gay man, disabled veteran, and U.S. citizen of Hispanic and Native American heritage, Eric knows about overcoming obstacles and navigating complex intersectionality. Drawing on his battle for equality in the military on behalf of the LGBTQ community, he discusses how that experience supports the momentum for diversity and inclusion in the workplace and how a commitment to equality attracts talent, builds a sense of belonging, and creates a competitive advantage.

Eric's overall story of courage and triumph over adversity inspires audiences to create change by doing the right thing, stand up for what they believe, and make the world a better place for those who deserve to be treated with dignity.

Breakout Sessions

Session 1: Breaking Boundaries: Psychedelics as a Treatment for Mental Health

Join Logan Davidson, a mental health advocate and policy strategist, and Dr. Lynnette Averill, a clinical psychologist and leading researcher in psychedelic-assisted therapy, for an insightful presentation on the emerging role of psychedelics in mental health treatment. This session explores cutting-edge research, policy developments, and real-world applications of psychedelic-assisted therapies for conditions such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

Dr. Averill will present key findings from clinical trials and research studies, emphasizing the science behind psychedelic compounds like MDMA and psilocybin. Logan Davidson will discuss advocacy efforts, policy challenges, and the journey toward expanding access through legislative and regulatory changes. Together, they will offer a comprehensive look at how psychedelics are reshaping the mental health landscape and what the future holds for treatment innovation.

Attendees will gain a deeper understanding of the therapeutic potential of psychedelics, ongoing research initiatives, and the crucial policy efforts needed to make these life-saving treatments widely available. A Q&A session will follow the presentation for an interactive discussion.

Logan Davidson

Texans for Greater Mental Health



Logan Davidson is the executive director of Texans for Greater Mental Health, a grassroots nonprofit supporting psychedelic therapies in Texas. Before joining T4GMH, he was a legislative and political staffer with bipartisan experience at the state and federal level. He served as Legislative Director and Chief of Staff for Representative Alex Dominguez, where he shepherded Texas' historic psychedelic therapy law, HB 1802, to passage and implementation. Logan graduated from Texas Tech University and received his MBA from the University of North Texas, and he resides in Austin, Texas.

Lynnette Averill, Ph.D.

Baylor College of Medicine



Dr. Lynnette A. Averill is the daughter of a US Marine who died by suicide after years of struggling with ineffective treatments. His life – and subsequent death – shaped Dr. Averill personally and professionally. The focus of Dr. Averill's work is on studying and supporting novel, rapid-acting interventions with potential to save lives. Her research focuses on the fine-grained understanding of mechanisms underlying psychedelic medicines, the effects of chronic stress and trauma, and treatment response. She served as subject matter expert for TX House Bill 1802 that passed with near unanimous bipartisan support and funds a clinical trial of psilocybin for Veterans with PTSD, which Dr. Averill will lead.

Session 2: Building Bridges Against Trafficking: Providing a Coordinated Response to Exploited Youth

This informative and engaging session will provide a brief overview of human trafficking followed by an in-depth discussion focused on an effective coordinated response to serving exploited youth. This session will provide an invaluable opportunity to enhance the participant's understanding and best practices in supporting those affected by exploitation and trafficking.

During this session, we will delve into the Texas Model for Care Coordination, which highlights the collaboration needed among agencies to ensure we are providing best practices and high-quality services to exploited youth. This model has been instrumental in fostering a more integrated and effective approach to care and support. We believe that collaborative efforts are essential in addressing the complex needs of exploited youth, and your participation in this session will contribute significantly to our collective goal of making a positive impact.

Iris Resendez, MPA – UTSA Alumni '08

BCFS Health and Human Services, Human Trafficking Interdiction Division – Building Bridges Against Trafficking (B-BAT) program



Irasema (Iris) Resendez serves as the Director for the Human Trafficking Interdiction Division of BCFS Health and Human Services overseeing the newly launched Building Bridges Against Trafficking (B-BAT) program, a Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth (CSEY) Care Coordination program in partnership with the Office of the Governor, Child Sex Trafficking Team. She most recently spearheaded the Enhanced Collaborative Model program – a joint program under the South Texas Officers and Prosecutors (STOP) Human Trafficking Task Force with the San Antonio Police Department.

With over 19 years of experience and direct service provision in post release and home study services, counter human trafficking, immigration legal assistance, refugee resettlement, migrant farm workers, and unaccompanied children, and experience in program development, Resendez brings a wealth of knowledge and extensive experience in her role.

Iris has led the Division's efforts to provide care coordination, outreach and awareness, and strengthening partnerships to address all forms of human trafficking as she took on the role of the Task Force Coordinator for the STOP Human Trafficking Task Force, where she also led the Victim Services Subcommittee, which created a centralized, coordinated system to help partners access the funds, partnerships, tools, and support they need in serving adult survivors of sex trafficking and survivors of labor trafficking among all ages. Resendez is now leading those same efforts with the B-BAT program.

Resendez was highly recommended by the Department of Homeland Security and invited by Harvard University – T.H. Chan School of Public Health, to be part of a special Panel of Experts in Human Trafficking Prevention Efforts, sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security Blue Campaign efforts, where she participated on numerous occasions in focus groups with other experts across the country who drew from their knowledge and experience in the human trafficking field. She is currently an advisory board member for Texas A&M International University's Center to Counter Human Trafficking, a member of the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Human Trafficking Collective's (HTC) first-ever Grantee Advisory and Implementation Council for OVC's Human Trafficking Victim Service grantees. The Council is designed to inform grantees of service trends, challenges and successes while

also informing OVC's HT Division on current grantee needs. She was also selected, along with twenty other leaders in the field, to be a part of a national convening with Project Roadmap, an Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) collaboration to identify victim centered, trauma-informed best practices for human trafficking task force multi-disciplinary teams. Throughout her career, Iris has participated in various panels and presented at various conferences and webinars sharing her expertise.

Prior to these roles, Resendez was also the National Partnerships Manager and helped launch the BCFS Health and Human Services Common Thread program, in partnership with the Texas Office of the Governor, to provide advocacy services to child sex trafficking survivors. Tasked with developing and maintaining community partnerships with key stakeholders throughout the State, drafting Memorandums of Understanding for the program and overseeing the community outreach team providing trainings and outreach to the community on commercial sexual exploitation, she also played a role in helping develop CSEY Care Coordination protocols for teams in various counties served by Common Thread.

A native of Harlingen, Texas, Resendez received her Bachelor of Arts degree dual majoring in Interpersonal Communications and Ethnic Studies from Bowling Green State University and her Master of Public Administration degree from The University of Texas at San Antonio.

Jessica Quinones

BCFS HHS HTI - BBAT Care Coordination Program



Jessica Quinones has extensive experience in supporting survivors of trauma and violence. She currently serves as the Lead Care Coordinator with BCFS HHS HTI - BBAT Program, under the direction of Program Director Iris Resendez. In her role, she works with a dedicated team to support youth who are at risk of, or have been confirmed, as survivors of sex trafficking or exploitation. Jessica and the B-BAT team collaborate closely with key community partners to ensure that no child falls through the cracks and that each case receives a tailored, comprehensive care plan to meet the unique needs of each youth.

Prior to joining the BBAT team, Jessica served as the Care Coordination Manager at ChildSafe, Bexar County's local Child Advocacy Center. In this role, she demonstrated exceptional leadership and commitment to supporting youth who have experienced trauma. She also spent six years as a victim advocate at the Bexar County District Attorney's Office, where she worked on cases involving child abuse, sex crimes, and domestic violence.

Jessica's dedication, passion and compassionate approach have contributed in providing the highest level of care and support to survivors of trauma.

Session 3: Building Community Resilience

In this session, attendees will learn about R.O.L.E.S., a five-step process that empowers people to not only identify their personal triggers but to also create a mental paradigm shift that takes a punitive, judgmental view of behavior and transforms it into an approach rooted in positive intent and constructive outcomes.

Jessica Huerta

Institute for Trauma-Informed Care at University Health



Jessica Huerta is the lead senior educator at University Health's Institute for Trauma-Informed Care. Jessica conducts training on trauma awareness, adverse childhood experiences, and trauma-informed care. Jessica leverages more than 20 years of experience in the nonprofit sector, which includes working with individuals and families in crisis by helping them find hope and opportunities in challenging times. Her passion is bringing awareness to trauma-informed care and calling attention to the many challenges families encounter as they navigate various systems. Jessica holds a bachelor's degree in education from Texas A&M San Antonio and is dedicated to making a positive impact in her community.

Session 4: Engaging Community Courageously

This session's purpose is to look within so we can engage without. The intention of the session is to create a safe space for self-reflection. Firstly, we must understand what our core beliefs of collaboration are in order to help deconstruct any internal barriers we may subconsciously have about collaborating within our communities. Secondly, we must understand the importance of collaboration when it pertains to social work. An example of this would be clients are a seed, our community is the soil, and the water is our collaboration within our community. A seed does not grow without good soil or water. The work of a social worker is triune. Lastly, the session will help develop creative ideas to engage our community.

Lory Hartsock, LMSW

ChildSafe



Licensed Master's Social Worker with direct practice experience in nonprofit social work, community organizations, and access to care. Lory holds a master's degree from Our Lady of the Lake University with an emphasis on the Hispanic Population and an undergrad in Business Management. Lory has demonstrated expertise in direct patient contact, community collaboration, advocacy, and training implementation. Lory's hope is to help others gain conviction in the field to engage communities in a compassionate and courageous way to influence systems of power and mitigate social injustices through advocacy.

Session 5: Healing with Sound Bowls: Restoring Balance through Vibration Therapy

Discover the transformative power of sound bowl healing in this interactive workshop designed to promote relaxation, emotional balance, and self-awareness. Participants will explore the science and art of vibrational therapy, learning how sound frequencies can help release tension, improve focus, and support emotional and physical well-being.

Debbie Garcia, LPC



Debbie Garcia is a bilingual Licensed Professional Counselor in the state of Texas. Debbie attained a Master of Arts degree (M.A.) in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Texas A&M University-San Antonio. Her therapeutic experiences include working with children, adults, military families, and university students. Debbie specializes in Sand Tray Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy and Somatic Therapy. She also has experience in suicide prevention, family violence, crisis and trauma.

Session 6: Let's Talk About Death and Grief

The purpose of this session will be to encourage discussion about topics related to death. In addition to education about grief, attendees will be invited to expand their personal death awareness and empathy.

Rachel Schindel Maupin, LCSW

Everest Therapy, PLLC



Rachel Schindel Maupin is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in her home state of Texas. Rachel's experience includes providing support and interventions to individuals, couples, and families in the context of aging concerns or chronic and life-limiting illness. She completed the Interdisciplinary Fellowship in Palliative Care at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System. Her clinical interests include anticipatory guidance through end-of-life, grief and bereavement, meaning making, palliative care, hospice, and ethics. Rachel co-authored the chapter "Anticipatory Guidance" in the Second Edition of The Oxford Textbook of Palliative Social Work. In the fall of 2024, Rachel launched Everest Therapy, PLLC.

Session 7: Limpas, Ojo, and Envida: Integrating Cultura & Evidence Based Practice into Therapy

This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to explore the therapeutic experiences of 10 clients, in which, the therapist integrated aspects of the client's cultura, specifically, limpas, ojo, envida, and presimientos with Polyvagal Theory. The narrative data collected through session observations and client feedback provides insights into ways that cultural beliefs and practices strengthened the therapeutic process and relationship. Themes related to cultural identity, healing rituals, disconnection from ancestral wisdom, and societal influence emerged. The findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive practice in theory to establish trust, rapport, and connection to the missing piece in the client's healing process. Understanding how cultural can be integrated into therapy offers valuable insights for culturally competent practice and highlights the necessity of honoring cultural practices in therapeutic interventions.

Erica Martinez, Ph.D., LCSW

Chamberlain University



Dr. Erica Martinez is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Chamberlain University, and founder of Fierce Mujeres, a nonprofit serving 1st Gen Latina college students. Her research interests are on protective factors of Latina professionals, the Latina pay gap, assertiveness, and salary negotiations.

Eloisa Zamora, LMSW – UTSA Alumni '17

Our Lady of the Lake University



Eloisa Zamora is an LMSW for Communities in Schools of San Antonio, an Adjunct Professor at Our Lady of the Lake University, and a PhD Candidate at OLLU as well. Eloisa's dissertation focuses on social factors that influence anxiety with Hispanic children using Socioecological Perspective. Eloisa's research interests are mental health with children, Latinos and mental health, and first-generation students and their college experiences.

Session 8: Maximizing Mindfulness Meditation to Manage Stress and Boost Professional Well-Being

We all deal with stress; it's how we process and deal with the stress that boosts our well-being. Professionals in all fields often experience stress, and although some stress may be beneficial, unmanaged chronic stress can significantly affect their mental and physical well-being. Mindfulness meditation is a practice that yields major positive results in the lives of those who engage daily. This session will promote well-being strategies that participants can take back to their professional settings and can be shared with their teams.

Maya Thomas Fernandez, Ed.D., MBA, SHRM-CP – UTSA Alumni '03

Texas A&M University



Dr. Maya Thomas Fernandez serves as Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning at Texas A&M University College of Dentistry. Dr. Thomas Fernandez has over ten years of higher education experience spanning from teaching, workforce and advancement, compliance, and policy. She currently teaches online courses for West Coast University. She also worked in the healthcare management space for over twelve years. Dr. Thomas Fernandez earned her doctorate in education from Concordia University Texas, her MBA in healthcare management, and a bachelor of arts in criminal justice from UTSA. She is committed to student success and removing barriers that impede student success. Dr. Thomas Fernandez is a Fulbright Specialist and has delivered a TEDx Talk titled *We Are From Here*.

Claudia Morales, Ed.D., CPTC

Global Goals Consulting "Education for Life"



Dr. Claudia J. Morales has been an educator for more than 25 years and has served in many roles in the public-school setting. She graduated from the University of Houston and became a Bilingual Educator. Later, she attended Concordia University Texas and completed a master's degree in school administration and a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction. Her Texas educator certifications include Bilingual Education, Special Education, School Administration (Principal), and a Montessori Early Childhood Credential. Dr. Morales believes learning is a lifelong process and continues advancing her education to improve her skills and help others achieve their goals. She recently completed certification courses in Mindfulness Meditation, Technical Writing, and Quality Matters (QM). Dr. Morales is committed to disrupting inequalities in education and promoting success for all.

Session 9: Music is Medicine: Incorporating Music into Clinical Practice

Discover how music, a universal and transformative force, can enhance emotional well-being, cognitive function, and physical health. This engaging presentation explores the profound impact of music on the brain and body, offering evidence-based insights into its therapeutic benefits. Attendees will learn practical, easy-to-implement techniques for integrating music into clinical settings, empowering them to create more dynamic, client-centered practices.

Joseph Gorordo, LCDC

Recovery Unplugged



Joseph Gorordo is the Senior VP of Outreach and Operations at Recovery Unplugged Texas and a Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor with over a decade of experience in substance abuse treatment. A long-time advocate for recovery since 2008, he has held key roles in the behavioral health field and serves as a Board Member of Recovery People and President of the Texas Association of Addiction Professionals.

Recipient of the 2019 Terry D. Hale Professional of the Year award, Joseph has developed programs such as Residential Treatment and Intensive Outpatient Programs. Outside work, he co-hosts the Talksicology Podcast, plays music, and spends time at the local Little League fields with his family. Recognized for his professional contributions, Joseph received the prestigious Terry D. Hale Professional of the Year award in 2019. His passion for creating meaningful change is evident in his development of various programs, including Residential Treatment, Intensive Outpatient Programs, and Extended Care Programs.

Session 10: No Shame in Your Game: Gaming as a Tool for Mental Health and Burnout Prevention

Ready to bust stereotypes about gamers and gaming? This session is here to show you the real power of gaming. We'll explore a spectrum of benefits related to gaming - from the growing evidence-base behind gaming as a clinical mental health intervention to the everyday use of gaming for burn out prevention and personal growth. Gaming is a powerful, highly accessible tool that you'll be equipped to strategically explore and integrate as a valuable part of your personal and professional growth.

Continued on next page...

Jennifer Horton, LCSW

Dull Made Daring



Jennifer is an LCSW in private practice in San Antonio, TX, and has been doing social work since 2015. She also delivers non-clinical group workshops and coaching that equip tech professionals to use gaming + sword/lightsaber play for career growth and burnout prevention. Jennifer loves adding experiential work into her practice and helping people nurture their need for connection, play, and fun. She is currently pursuing Ludospot lightsaber teacher certification and is a General Skills certified FCBD dance teacher (and offers free or reduced cost, social work and clinician-only dance experiences for clinician self-care...seek me out if you want in!)

Session 11: Pediatric Autism Communication Therapy: Empowering Families to Empower Their Children

Pediatric Autism Communication Therapy (PACT) is an evidence-based, parent-mediated, video-aided intervention. This approach has demonstrated significant efficacy in the promotion of social communicative initiations of child participants that generalize and sustain over time. This lecture will provide an overview of the extensive PACT research base as well as an introduction to the core therapeutic techniques and targets associated with the model. Participants will follow one family's journey through PACT and will gain insight into how this developmental, relationship based model promotes well-being in entire family systems.

Anna Paola Smith, LCSW

Autism Community Network



Anna Paola Smith attended The University of Texas at Austin, where she received her BA in Psychology and her Masters degree in Clinical Social Work. She has had the opportunity to work with children and families in the school, hospital, and clinical setting. Anna Paola's interests lie in family systems and how the development of one child may impact the entire family unit. She started a sibling support group at Autism Community Network to provide siblings a safe space to share their own experiences. Anna Paola also provides routine follow-ups to caregivers after their child receives an autism diagnosis and is a bilingual Pediatric Autism Communication Therapy Accredited Practitioner, supporting families impacted by autism through dyadic coaching. Anna Paola is part of an interdisciplinary diagnostic team that uses strength-based approach to address the unique presentation of the child and family.

Session 12: Preventing Burnout by Increasing Cultural Competence

A healthcare system that embraces cultural humility, where we find ourselves rewarded for supporting, uplifting, and respecting our patients' diverse voices could pave the way for battling burnout (Elbanna et al., 2023). Often, we are rewarded for participating in the never-ending cycle of ensuring others get what they need, meeting various deadlines, getting external validation, and just generally doing it all. But there is woefully little glory in prioritizing your own physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

Burnout is a very real and pervasive issue - affecting thousands in our profession each year. Alongside the staggering numbers of those affected are the BILLIONS of dollars in lost productivity and necessary interventions which are then required to treat the very issue we are trained to help others avoid, and be proactive against. When social workers are well, the sky is the limit. This session will focus on how cultural competence can aid in alleviating burnout, regardless of the practice setting.

Ashley Stephens, LCSW-S, Ph.D.

Apela Licensure Supervision & Counseling, PLLC

The Crane & The Bull, Corp



Ashley Stephens is a Board Certified Licensed Clinical Social Work Supervisor, licensed in nine states and supervising associate-level social workers in five. She completed her doctoral degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Grand Canyon University in 2023. She earned her master's in social work from East Tennessee State University and her bachelor's in psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As a therapist, Ashley has worked with severe and persistent mental illness, substance abuse, trauma, homelessness, and has trained in a variety of therapeutic styles. The bulk of her training and experience was with Veterans Affairs, working with combat Veterans. As a consultant and trainer, Ashley has taught courses in cultural awareness and competency, mindfulness, brain injury, and leadership development. She has coached executive leaders, managers, and front-line employees while providing opportunities for individuals to grow in the areas of organizational development, team building, executive development, and training.

As a supervisor, Ashley's main goal is to train the next generation of therapists AND leaders, with a particular focus and emphasis on building a life that serves them. The social work profession often has a reputation for being hard to survive and thrive. Ashley's goal is to help create clinical social workers who are prepared for the realities of the field, and ready to take on growing their own practices into thriving businesses.

Session 13: Rejuvenating Hope in Social Work Practice

Are you navigating bureaucratic, punitive-heavy settings as a Social Worker with restoration at heart? This session will incorporate motivational, holistic, and humanistic theories of practice for use in macro, community, and private practice settings.

Emily Perez, LCSW-S – UTSA Alumni '14

The University of Texas at San Antonio



Emily Perez, LCSW-S (she/her), is a University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) MSW graduate. Emily currently works at UTSA as the MSW Director and is a Professor of Practice, teaching most-commonly Individuals and Field coursework. Emily also owns and runs a private practice called Midway Counseling and Consulting, which many other UTSA graduates are a part of as providers while in clinical supervision and afterwards.

Emily is an avid hiker, hammock-napper, and enjoys mixing up teas and elixirs for holistic healing for she and her family's continued wellness. She practices continual learning in a holistic manner, integrating mind and body connection towards healing.

Vanessa Fears, LMSW, LCDC-I – UTSA Alumni '23

Bexar County Department of Behavioral Health



Vanessa Fears, LMSW, LCDC-I (she/her) is a graduate of the MSW program at UTSA and is currently pursuing her Community Nutrition Certification at UTSA while also working under supervision for her LCSW. Vanessa works with Bexar County's Department of Behavioral Health as a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Program Coordinator conducting SUD screenings for individuals who are impacted by the carceral system, aiming to divert from incarceration to SUD treatment facilities.

Vanessa enjoys running, hiking, gardening, and engaging in creative activities as part of her self-care routine. She promotes physical wellness and prepares health promoting meals for her and her family, recognizing the connection between movement and nutrition as essential components of overall well-being. Vanessa continues to explore the intersection of SUD and nutrition and applying radical authenticity in both her professional and community engagements, recognizing the significance of human relationships and connection in this process.

Session 14: The Ripple Effect: Understanding Trauma as the Root of Substance Use and Mental Health Challenges

This engaging presentation examines the profound connection between trauma, substance use disorders, and mental health challenges, emphasizing the critical need for trauma-informed care to achieve meaningful and lasting recovery. Participants will explore the multidimensional nature of trauma and its pervasive impact on the brain, body, and psyche. Through compelling research and a detailed case study, the session uncovers how unresolved trauma fuels addiction and mental distress, revealing the hidden narratives driving maladaptive behaviors.

The presentation goes beyond surface-level understanding, equipping behavioral health professionals with strategies to recognize and address trauma's root causes. Attendees will engage in thought-provoking, interactive exercises designed to foster reflection on how trauma subtly influences behaviors—both in clients and within their own professional frameworks. By cultivating a deeper understanding of trauma's pervasive effects, participants will gain the tools needed to open pathways for transformative healing, empower clients to build resilience and help them reclaim a sense of agency in their lives.

Justin Sanderson, MA, LPC-S, MBA

Stone River Recovery Center



Justin Sanderson, MA, LPC-S, MBA, is a highly respected clinician and the CEO of Stone River Recovery Center, where he combines his extensive trauma therapy expertise with visionary leadership to drive meaningful outcomes for clients in recovery. As an EMDR-trained therapist, Justin has worked for years with survivors of interpersonal violence, children coping with grief, individuals struggling with substance abuse, and others facing complex trauma. His approach is deeply shaped by existential philosophy, focusing on meaning-making, personal responsibility, and the search for authentic existence. This perspective has informed the development of several innovative clinical programs, widely recognized for their engaging and effective methods in addressing core struggles and fostering lasting success. Justin's integration of existential thought with evidence-based practices ensures a therapeutic experience that is both intellectually sophisticated, engaging, and profoundly impactful.

Session 15: Trauma-Informed Design: Integrating social work practice and architectural innovation to enhance wellbeing through the built environment

Learn about the Social Impact Studio's multi-disciplinary approach that integrates social work practice with architecture and design of the built environment using trauma-informed design.

Scott Ackerson, LMSW

Social Impact Studio at WestEast Design



Scott is an LMSW and Director of the Social Impact Studio. He serves on numerous boards in the community, including the local CoC Board. In his current role as Chair of the CoC Membership Committee, he helps to organize all partner organizations for the CoC. He was responsible for the creation and coordination of the wraparound services, partner relations, and program development at the Haven for Hope Campus, including behavioral health and workforce development.

Sarah Akhtar, LPC, MSW – UTSA Alumni '12, '17, '24

Social Impact Studio at WestEast Design



Sarah is a Licensed Professional Counselor who started her career in mental health providing direct-care treatment to diverse populations across various settings. Limited in her role as a mental health counselor, Sarah pursued a master's in social work to focus on addressing systemic issues and inequalities. Sarah integrates a systems and ecological approach to address the root cause of problems, upholding the wellbeing of individuals while acknowledging the role of systems in perpetuating injustices and inequality. Sarah is a UTSA MSW alumna.

Pegah Taher Toloo Del

Social Impact Studio at WestEast Design



Pegah Taher Toloo Del is an accomplished designer at WestEast Design where she integrates her expertise in design and business development to create spaces that inspire and serve diverse communities. With a background in biology and a lifelong passion for architecture, her journey from science to design has given her a distinctive perspective, blending biomimicry and biophilia to craft environments that connect people to nature while addressing practical needs. Pegah's empathetic approach is central to her work, particularly in trauma-informed design. Her commitment to understanding user needs is evident in every phase of project development, from concept to construction, as she seamlessly coordinates complex projects with a holistic approach. Her portfolio spans a diverse range of projects, from small home solutions and higher education campuses to large-scale industrial developments. Drawing from international experiences and broad cultural insight, Pegah approaches each project with sensitivity and innovation, creating meaningful spaces that resonate across communities.

Social Work Alumni Group Leadership

The purpose of the Social Work Alumni Group (SWAG) is to create a network of alumni who share the affinity of being a Social Work Roadrunner. Through our network, we aim to facilitate an inclusive environment among UTSA alumni, students, faculty, and staff to advance the interests and needs of our community.

For more information about the council or if you are interested in leadership, please contact swag@utsa.edu.

Elizabeth 'Liz' Cruz, LCSW '10



Elizabeth is currently working at San Antonio Affordable Housing as a Project Manager for Operation Rebuild. She is also working as a therapist helping bring healing to families, she is also a Registered Play Therapist, and adjunct at UTSA, training future social workers.

Seema Bhatia, LCSW '20



Soon after graduating, Seema was contracted with UTSA's field office as an FEPS Coordinator for the Field Education Professional Simulation (FEPS) program. Seema is currently employed as the Lead Clinician for BCFS HHS. She previously worked as a Licensed Counselor with Communities In Schools in SAISD. Seema has close to six years of experience working with youth and adolescents. She is passionate about youth literacy and mental health.

Bethany Gutierrez Weyand, MSW '14, '20



Bethany is a two-time graduate from UTSA, earning her BA in Psychology in 2014 followed by her MSW in 2020. She is an alum from the UT Systems Graduate Archer Fellowship program and the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Bethany has past experience working with youth groups, our houseless residents, and elderly in a skilled nursing facility. Bethany currently works under the Texas House of Representatives as Representative Diego Bernal's District Director. As District Director she advocates for San Antonio community members and Texas constituents in crisis, assisting them in navigating complex bureaucratic systems. Bethany is passionate about advancing advocacy initiatives from micro to macro levels of social work to shape state policies impacting daily lives.

She is skilled at client advocacy and government relations, policy development, bipartisan coalition building, and grassroots organizing for a more equitable society. Bethany is an experienced mentor to BSW and MSW students, preparing them for impactful careers in macro-level social work through guidance and hands-on experience in public policy and social justice initiatives.

Samantha Roman, LMSW '20



Samantha Roman is a graduate of the UTSA Social Work Program. Samantha earned her license in December 2020 and began working in the behavioral health service line. She works with an array of staff: doctors, nurses, therapists, and many others to meet the needs of the patients. She also works with community members to assist with appointments and applicable resources for patients when discharged from hospital services. She is now working on her clinical license and continues to seek out education via those she works with, patients, conferences, and events.

Morgan Zachmeyer, LMSW '22



Morgan earned her BSW at Southern University and A&M College in 2020 and her MSW from UTSA in 2022. Since earning her LMSW that same year, Morgan has worked in two nontraditional roles while still using her social work skills to empower and enrich the lives of the citizens of our community. First supporting caregivers of older adults with dementia and chronic illness as a Certified Dementia Practitioner, Morgan now serves as a Certified Advisor for Northwest Vista College, walking with students in their journeys to eliminate poverty in workforce development and education. Let's Go 210!

Proceeds from the SWAG Conference help fund the SWAG Scholarship for MSW students and SWAG operating costs.

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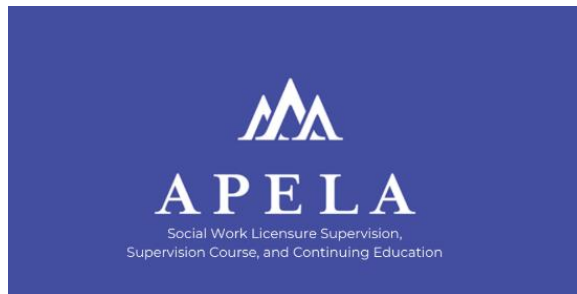


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An anonymous Social Work Alumnus generously sponsored today's snacks, and another anonymous Social Work Alumnus donated this morning's breakfast and coffee.

Introducing a new recipient of the

SOCIAL WORK ALUMNI GROUP ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP

Cristal Martinez '18, '26

San Antonio, TX
Master of Social Work

Cristal is a first-generation returning Roadrunner, having earned her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with a minor in Legal Studies in 2018. Currently, she is pursuing her Master of Social Work at the College of Health, Community and Policy.

As a first-generation student, Cristal recognized the importance of becoming involved. She was involved with the Student Psychology Association and Active Minds on campus during her undergraduate time. Being in that supportive environment inspired her to take on leadership roles and help other students feel they belong and find their paths. Additionally, she was accepted into the UTSA Educational Research Training Program in her junior year, during which she had the privilege of connecting with experts in her field.

Cristal is thrilled to be back at UTSA to earn her MSW. Her future career ambition is to become a nonprofit leader where she can apply her knowledge to enhance services for her community.



"I am writing to express my sincere appreciation for being chosen as a recipient of the Social Work Alumni Group Annual Scholarship. This incredible opportunity will contribute to further my education. As a firm believer in breaking down barriers to create positive outcomes, I am honored to have been selected."

"It is widely recognized in the social work field that removing barriers often leads to better outcomes in our communities. Being chosen as a recipient of this scholarship demonstrates this principle in action, as it will help alleviate some of the financial pressures that often accompany students as they pursue further their education, myself being one of those students."

"Thank you for investing in my academic journey and the future of social work. But overall, thank you for your commitment to UTSA and supporting students now and in the future."