



Filling a Void

University takes a team approach to making counseling services available to all

by Kathleen Schock

Tucked away in a non-descript strip mall in central Fresno is a place so treasured by Maira Martinez she can scarcely describe it.

“For me it’s family. It’s passion. It’s commitment,” Martinez says. “It’s a labor of love that has been my baby for so long. I’ve seen it grow from the ground up, seen all the hard work that the students put in I can’t really put it in words.”

The place Martinez struggles to define is the Fresno Family Counseling Center. Operated through the Kremen School of Education and Human Development at Fresno State, the center has been giving graduate students an opportunity to gain clinical experience in marriage, family and child counseling since 1985.

But a short conversation with any of the center’s students or faculty reveals that it’s so much more.

“There is just an incredible passion here,” says Dr. Christopher Lucey, who directs the center and supervises students. “There is just so much potential in this place that it makes my head spin.”

The Fresno Family Counseling Center provides low-cost counseling services to the public with a staff of up to 90 graduate level Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) student trainees, 20 post-graduate registered MFT interns and a team of licensed marriage and family therapists who are faculty in the Kremen School.



Cary Edmondson

Dr. Christopher Lucey, who directs the center, discusses recent counseling sessions with students.



Above: Marriage, Family and Child Counseling students Eric Rosen, Marcela Segura and Noralyn Marano monitor a session.

The sessions are videotaped and monitored by licensed supervisors, enhancing the quality of counseling for patients and providing immediate and intensive training for student therapists. Lucey says it's a system that maximizes student learning while providing great benefit for clients. "When you come here you're paying for one therapist, but you're really getting seven."

By the end of this academic year the center is expected to have held more than 10,000 sessions. Two-thirds of the clients are considered impoverished and cannot be served by the local mental health system because of county budgetary constraints or other barriers to access.

"The work we do here is important to our students who are getting an incredible clinical experience, but it's also so important to the community because many of our clients have nowhere else to go," says Dr. Kyle Weir, a supervising faculty member in the counselor education program.

While clients are expected to pay for their sessions, the fees are on a sliding scale. Lucey says that contributing financially to treatment, even if it's as low as one dollar, encourages ownership and accountability.

"We serve a lot of low-income families and we have the skills, techniques and experience to really make a difference in their lives," says Xee Thoa, who has spent two-and-a-half years with the center and is now applying to doctoral programs. She says her personal background has profoundly influenced the work she is doing through the center.

REACHING THE COMMUNITY

Thoa is the oldest of six children. Her parents are Hmong refugees from Laos. "When I went into the MFT program I was confused about mental health because it wasn't something that was talked about in my family or in the Hmong community," she says.

Looking for a way to educate and engage her community in mental health issues, Thoa partnered with Stone Soup, a Fresno-based organization that supports Southeast Asian refugee families. Thoa established a summer program for adults on parenting issues, and a program for teenagers that discussed identity, relationships, emotional well-being and coping skills.

"There is a real lack of research about Hmong mental health needs," Thoa explains. "Fresno Family Counseling Center allowed me to be innovative and creative in how I worked with and engaged my community."

Martinez, who started with the center as a student and now works as the program manager, is also committed to destigmatizing mental health care. "I want to educate the community that mental health care is not for 'crazy people.' It's a tool that can help everyone."

In 2010, Martinez provided "Placticas," a program that provided mental health outreach at food distributions in rural Fresno and Madera counties through a Kaiser Family grant with Fresno Family Counseling Center and Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission. Counselors would talk with people as they waited in line and refer them to group sessions they held throughout the San Joaquin Valley on depression, anxiety, parenting and relationships.

When funding for that program ran out, Martinez says the students and faculty continued to volunteer for an additional year because they understood the value of the outreach. "I've never seen that kind of passion in any other group that I've worked with. We're just a jewel in the community. I want everyone to know about the work we are doing so we can continue to grow."

RELYING ON PRIVATE SUPPORT

Dr. Harry Moordigian, a retired Fresno dentist and alumnus of Fresno State, is a major donor to the Fresno Family Counseling Center. "Mental health issues need to be addressed, one way or another," he says.

Dr. Moordigian has a long record of supporting the university, but his passion for the Fresno Family Counseling Center grew from a letter written in Armenian that he discovered three years ago. After having the document translated, Moordigian learned that it was letter to his father, written by his mother shortly before her death from breast cancer at age 33.

"My parents were survivors of the Armenian genocide," Dr. Moordigian explains. "Through this letter I learned that in addition to my paternal grandfather, my mother's father had also been killed in the genocide when my parents were very young." He says she was able to escape to America and start a family, but died of cancer when Moordigian was just 3 years old.

"This letter is how I finally met my mother. And when I realized what she went through without any counseling, it just tore me apart."

Moordigian shared the letter with faculty at the Fresno Family Counseling Center and learned that his mother likely suffered from depression. "I said to myself, 'OK, I want to support what they are doing for the community in memory of my parents.'"

Private support is critical to the center, which operates on a shoe-string budget. The center's 12 counseling rooms are furnished with hand-me-downs from campus, the walls were painted by student volunteers and the small staff is constantly looking to stretch its budget to maximize its reach.

While the staff says the financial constraints are a constant struggle, it is well worth the effort. "Coming here is like coming home to my second family," Martinez says. "This is soul work."