



## **International Network for School Social Work**

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### **Electronic Newsletter April 2013**

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### **Social Work Perspectives: Lessons Learned From Two Years In Mongolia**

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*"Each country's customs are different, just as each meadow's grass is different."  
- Mongolian Parable*



I love stories and parables. Perhaps it is the social worker in me that appreciates how a story can convey an idea, lesson, or meaning, while allowing room for differing interpretations depending on the individual's viewpoint. Life and culture are about stories. We create our own story as we weave through the tapestry of experiences that shape our unique perspective. It is through this story that we learn who we are and how we want to "be" in the world.

As this Mongolian parable says, each of us is different; each culture has its own customs, ideas, and experiences. Diversity exists between countries as it also exists in the natural world. When we interact with other cultures and perspectives, we are afforded a beautiful opportunity to observe, learn about, and practice a different approach. I have spent the past two years trying to do just this. Working as a social worker in Mongolia, I have attempted to explore and investigate the "meadows" of this country, its culture, and customs.

I am a clinical social worker from Hawai'i. With 10 years of experience as a social worker in school, hospital, and community settings, I came to Mongolia in June 2011 to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer with the Community Youth Development project.<sup>1</sup> My primary work placement is with the Mongolian Association of School Social Workers (MASSW), a non-governmental organization focused on training and professional development, capacity building,

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<sup>1</sup> Peace Corps is an independent U.S. government agency that provides trained and skilled volunteers to developing countries, based on the needs and requests of the country. The Community Youth Development project in Mongolia pairs volunteers (with social work and/or other youth-related work experience) with school social workers across Mongolia, in vocational and secondary schools. The goals of the project aim to support the development of school social work in the country and foster positive youth development in school settings. For more information about Peace Corps, visit [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

and advocacy for the school social work profession in Mongolia. My role centers on supporting curriculum development and conducting trainings and workshops for school social workers, as well as assisting with research, writing, and other special projects and initiatives.

School social work growth and development is exciting in Mongolia. A rather new profession in the country (begun only 15 years ago), social work has steadily increased its role and presence in recent years. Perhaps this is owing to the support of national policy, which mandates a school social work position in every secondary school (not all of these positions are filled, however, by qualified social workers), or maybe it is Mongolia's openness in inviting foreign professionals, volunteers, and alternative perspectives to the table to share ideas or try something new. Whatever the reason, Mongolia seems poised to continue a trend of support and enthusiasm for school social work development.

During my time in Mongolia, I have found myself expanding on and adapting previously held ideas and creating new narratives and concepts for social work practice, and for my role as a social worker from the United States. These stories derive from questions about how I approach



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social work practice, different views and perspectives on social policies or programs, and even questions of why or how I think and orient myself in a social work perspective. Cultural perceptions and alternative methods have been hallmark aspects of my time in Mongolia. One of my favorite things has been the exchange of information and ideas. I learn something new in every conversation, each training and workshop, and through our work projects. I enjoy sharing what I know to be true about social work, and in turn being presented with new ways of thinking and

working. Some days are incredibly challenging, often due to language difficulties, cultural differences, or simple misunderstandings. But, generally after one of these difficult days, I realize I have learned a new lesson that I will take with me.

Two years in Mongolia has afforded me some very inspiring adventures and experiences. I have had the opportunity to travel to remote parts of the country, eat new and unique foods (yak yogurt being one of my favorites), learn about and practice Mongolian Buddhism techniques, and delve into personal and professional relationships different from those I have back home. I even survived two winters in Mongolia where the average winter temperature is -20 Celsius/-13 Fahrenheit.

My time in this country will be ending soon and I will be returning home. With an impending departure date and termination on my mind, I find myself reflecting on the personal and professional changes I have gone through during my time here. Mongolia has changed me. I am a different person in many respects. While the past two years have been filled with both emotional highs and lows, each of these moments has brought something new. I have been exposed to alternative practice styles, new presentation methods and group activities, different youth problems than I was faced with in my work at home, and much more. I am excited to go home, to reintegrate into the social work community in Hawai'i, and to discuss and share the ideas I have been exposed to. By exploring the lessons I have learned in Mongolia with colleagues, friends, and family in the United States, I hope to further understand and enhance my perspective as a social worker.