



Cultural Humility in Action

By Emilia Gutierrez

Student Spotlight: Melissa Stek

Melissa Stek's culturally humble attitude is a huge asset to the School of Social Work and to the field as a whole. She speaks Spanish and makes a point to immerse herself in the culture of the clients that she works with. I had the privilege of seeing Melissa in action during an advocacy event organized by her field placement. The dignity-centered, empowering principles that guide Melissa are evident in her interactions with clients. Everything from her body language to her genuine enthusiasm for her group's successes tells you that Melissa and the teenagers she works with accept her as a team member as opposed to an authoritarian figure. Her character paired with these invaluable skills makes us remarkably proud to call Melissa a fellow social worker, advocate, and ally.

Melissa is a first-year 16-month student in the School of Social Work concentrating in Community Organizing with a minor in Management of Human Services. Her practice area is Community and Social Systems. Melissa is a Global Activities Scholar and will be spending her summer semester in Chile interning as a community organizer. Melissa is from the Grand Rapids area and she received her BSW from Calvin College. Her undergraduate field placement was at Bethany Christian Services where she worked in their refugee outreach assistance and referral program. Before coming to the University of Michigan School of Social Work, Melissa was an AmeriCorps member who taught ESL classes to parents of students in the Grand Rapids Public Schools. After her time in AmeriCorps, Melissa became a caseworker for unaccompanied minors at Bethany Christian Services before transitioning to her work as a community school coordinator for Kent Schools Services Network. While being the community school coordinator, Melissa connected families with community resources and built school partnerships with community agencies. She also organized an immigrant rights training, an after-school program and a mentoring program.

Melissa's current field placement is at the Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights (WICIR), an outreach project of the Ypsilanti First Congregational United Church of Christ. WICIR is a grassroots organization made up of a diverse group of members

who respond to the needs of the immigrant community. They advocate for the promotion and protection of human rights for all people, regardless of their documentation status. WICIR was born out of a response to immigration raids that were happening in the community, and since their formation, they have coordinated work teams to meet a variety of needs. They have an urgent response team, a political action team, a legal team, and a community education team. WICIR also has a group called Community Conversations, which is an organizing group of undocumented adults and their allies who meet to coordinate and talk about the needs of the undocumented community.

At WICIR, Melissa works on a variety of projects. One of the projects is helping to facilitate the inspiring WICIR Teen Group. The Teen Group started as a support group for teenagers in the community whose families have been affected by detainment or deportation of a family member. More recently, the WICIR Teen group has developed a community organizing focus. They take action on a local level surrounding policy changes to make their cities safer, more accessible, and more equitable. The teens are currently involved in the Washtenaw County ID Project, which is a task force working to create a county ID that would remove identity barriers for community members. Melissa also is involved with the urgent response team at WICIR. When a call from the community comes in about an urgent matter, she will help facilitate a rapid response with her colleagues.

When speaking with Melissa, it is clear that she is inspired by the youth that she works with. As Melissa stated, "My experience with WICIR is teaching me real-life effective strategies for organizing that I can apply in my future career." When asked what she would like to do as a social worker in her future, Melissa said she would like to be a community organizer around issues of immigration and/or youth empowerment.

