

# EPISODE



Department of Epidemiology | Gillings School of Global Public Health | The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill | June 2017

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Dr. Andrew Olshan

## Letter from the chair

In this issue of *Episode*, we focus on the Department of Epidemiology's social epidemiology program. Social epidemiology has been important to the department's research and training program since the 1950s. John Cassel, the department's first full-time chair, brought social epidemiology into a department that had focused on infectious diseases during its first decade.

Over the years, outstanding epidemiologists, including Al Tyroler, Sherman James, Steve Wing and Jay Kaufman, have joined the faculty. They developed principles and methods of social epidemiology and infused them into research on health outcomes. In their research, these leaders created intersections between social epidemiology and other areas – for example, environmental epidemiology – with striking results. Our faculty and students have brought expertise on ways to gain a better understanding of how social factors affect health in North Carolina and around the world.

In 2014, the department brought Allison Aiello on to the faculty to lead and revitalize the social epidemiology program. This effort was a resounding success with a refreshed curriculum, synergy among the faculty, the addition of new faculty members, new study resources and the recruitment of top students. In this issue of the newsletter, we feature conversations on social epidemiology with an alumna, current students and Professor Aiello.

We also acknowledge the passing of Steve Wing, a beloved faculty member. He was a hero to many inside the department, school and local community. Steve's passion for social justice was unsurpassed and inspirational. Several of his students are featured in this issue.

The story on John Cassel provides an opportunity to mention that Vic Schoenbach, Judith Winkler and I have been working on a history of our department. Researching our history has been challenging, but it also has been an exciting endeavor. The first part of the history will include highlights from 1936 to 1976. I believe that alumni, current and former faculty members and students will find this a fascinating tour back to the earliest days of the Gillings School and the Department of Epidemiology. We are planning a special "reveal" event in the fall with the distribution of the document.

I very much hope you enjoy this issue. My term as chair ends in December 2017, and although I will still be around teaching, pursuing my research and continuing my involvement in other responsibilities, this will be my last newsletter. I am

proud of the evolution of the Department of Epidemiology since 2006 when I became chair and appreciate all the important support and contributions to our success from Dean Rimer, faculty, students, staff and alumni. I have enjoyed the role of chair and learned much from my colleagues, but I also look forward to returning to being a “regular” faculty member.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact me (*andy\_olshan@unc.edu*) with any questions, comments or recommendations you may have for future stories.

Best regards,



**Andrew Olshan, PhD**, Chair, Department of Epidemiology  
Barbara Sorenson Hulka Distinguished Professor in Cancer Epidemiology

## Letter from the alumni co-chairs

Dear fellow epidemiology alumni,

As your alumni representatives this past year, we have worked to promote communication and to strengthen connections between alumni and the Department of Epidemiology. Again this year, we have selected a winner of the H. A. Tyroler Distinguished Alumni Award. The award recognizes an alumnus/a of the Department of Epidemiology who has had a substantial impact on the field of epidemiology and demonstrated a notable breadth of work. All the nominees have made impressive contributions to the field, reflecting the strength of our outstanding alumni. The award will be presented during the H. A. Tyroler Seminar in fall 2017. We hope you can join us. During the Tyroler seminar, we will also present the Kaplan Student Publication Award, which recognizes the outstanding student publication of the year. The epidemiology section of the Gillings Alumni Association sponsors the Kaplan award to highlight the impressive quality of publications by the department’s current students.

This spring, epidemiology alumni helped organize a networking event with prospective students. We hope the event will continue to grow in coming years. Ideally, it will facilitate interaction among alumni, current students and prospective students and help prospective or accepted students decide to attend UNC. We are sponsoring an alumni event at the Society for Epidemiologic Research’s annual meeting this summer in Seattle. Please be on the lookout for details for the gathering. We look forward to catching up with alumni!

We are updating our alumni listservs to unite and engage our community and help notify alumni about important department events and opportunities. Please sign up by following this link: <http://eepurl.com/czXrnH>. We also encourage you to familiarize yourself with the alumni online community [Gillings Well Connected](#) and receive updates from the Gillings School. Please let us know what issues and concerns are important to you. We value your feedback and have enjoyed representing you. We will be handing off our duties this summer to our fellow alumni, Corey Kalbaugh (PhD, 2016, *corey\_kalbaugh@med.unc.edu*) and Jonathan Todd (PhD, 2016, *jvtodd@email.unc.edu*). Serving as your alumni representatives has been a wonderful experience. We look forward to seeing Corey and Jonathan’s term.

Sincerely,

Katie O’Brien (MSPH, 2010, PhD, 2013)  
*obrienkm2@niehs.nih.gov*  
Alexandra White (MSPH, 2012; PhD, 2015)  
*alexandra.white@nih.gov*



*Katie O’Brien (left) and  
Alexandra White*

# Catching up with an alumna

**Lydia Feinstein (MSPH, 2011; PhD, 2014)** is an epidemiologist in the Public Health Sciences Group at Social & Scientific Systems Inc. in Durham, N.C.

While at UNC, Feinstein received the Bernard G. Greenberg Award for Excellence in Doctoral Research for her research on HIV-exposed infants in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. As a postdoctoral researcher in the department and at the Carolina Population Center, her work examined the multi-level pathways through which social determinants shape disparities in health and aging in the U.S.

In her current position at Social & Scientific Systems, Feinstein is responsible for providing analytic leadership on epidemiologic studies on behalf of the federal government. Much of her work focuses upon the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences' Gulf Long-Term Follow-Up Study, a longitudinal cohort study of the health effects of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill clean-up effort. She also contributes to epidemiologic research initiatives on the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey and the Agricultural Health Study.

Feinstein is an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Epidemiology at UNC and has several ongoing projects in social and infectious diseases epidemiology, health disparities, novel biomarker approaches, and implementation and outcomes research.



*Dr. Feinstein*

**Was there a particular experience or situation that led you to choose epidemiology as a profession?**

At the end of college, I worked as an intern in the disease surveillance and outbreak group at the Uganda Ministry of Health in Kampala. That experience showed me how important epidemiology is to maintaining and improving human health. It also introduced me to what I saw as a career that would allow me to help people live healthier and happier lives, while also challenging me intellectually and emotionally. My internship in Kampala was one of many incredible life-changing experiences to which I attribute my career path.

**What experiences or people in the Department of Epidemiology were most critical to you in developing the background a professional epidemiologist needs?**

There are really a number of answers I could give here: learning epidemiology methods from some of the smartest people in the world (Charlie Poole, David Richardson and Steve Cole), and being supported by

so many inspirational mentors while in the master's program (Annelies Van Rie), doctoral program (Frieda Behets) and during my postdoctoral work (Allison Aiello). Besides those obvious things, I think my graduate research assistantship with Frieda Behets during doctoral training really takes the cake as the most instrumental experience in my professional development. Throughout the process of my dissertation work, I collaborated closely with Frieda and my colleagues at UNC and in Kinshasa to improve the quality of clinical data collection and real-time use of data for improved patient and program management. It's an unglamorous but critically needed area, and it's not an easy job. The analytic and implementation challenges we overcame to empower our Congolese colleagues to improve clinical care in their country helped me develop professional skills you really can't teach in a classroom. These include resourcefulness, patience, persistence and decisiveness. I will be forever grateful for that experience.

# Faculty news



*Dr. Maselko*



*Dr. Golightly*



*Dr. Ranapurwala*



*Dr. Gralinski*



*Dr. Gower*

## Appointments

**Joanna (“Asia”) Maselko, ScD** – Maselko joined the faculty as an associate professor. She is a social and psychiatric epidemiologist whose work focuses upon the intergenerational transmission of risk and the role of the environment in shaping developmental trajectories in children. She is interested in global mental health and leads a large project that evaluates the long-term impacts of a community-based perinatal depression intervention on child development in rural Pakistan.

**Yvonne Golightly, PT, MS, PhD** – Golightly was appointed as an assistant professor. She worked as a research assistant professor in the Department of Epidemiology from 2012 to 2016. She is a musculoskeletal epidemiologist and physical therapist with more than a decade of research and clinical experience. Her research interests include osteoarthritis, musculoskeletal injury, lower-body musculoskeletal disorders, biomechanics and physical activity. She has worked with the Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project for more than 11 years and has authored or co-authored over 20 publications using data from this cohort. She is principal investigator of Role of Joint Hypermobility in Lower-Body Osteoarthritis, a current R01 project that analyzes data from three large osteoarthritis cohorts.

**Shabbar Ranapurwala, PhD** – Ranapurwala joined the faculty as a research assistant professor. He is an injury epidemiologist

interested in causal inference and in modern analytical approaches to injury and public health problems. His research focuses upon opioid-use disorder and related sequelae, occupational injury prevention and violence prevention.

**Lisa Gralinski, PhD** – Gralinski joined the faculty as a research assistant professor. Her research focuses upon respiratory virus infections and their interactions with the host immune system. She works with Ralph Baric, PhD, professor of epidemiology, investigating the role of host genetic variation in contributing to disease resistance or exacerbation. Through her studies of host-virus interactions, she aims to identify host genetic signatures that predict general risk factors and individual disease severity allowing for personalized medical intervention.

**Emily Gower, PhD** – Gower joined the faculty as an associate professor. Her research focuses upon improving trichiasis surgery outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa. She is principal investigator for an NIH-sponsored clinical trial that is recruiting approximately 4,000 people in southern Ethiopia. The trial is examining outcomes from two surgical methods used to correct in-turned eyelashes. Dr. Gower works closely with the international trachoma community and takes a lead role globally in guiding trichiasis surgery implementation and monitoring. She has a keen interest in utilizing large databases to assess medical outcomes and in improving access to care.



*Dr. Keil*



*Dr. Sun*



*Dr. Smith*



*Dr. Daniels*



*Dr. Troester*

***Xuezheng Sun, PhD*** – Sun joined the faculty as a research assistant professor. She is a molecular epidemiologist committed to personalized risk assessment and targeted prevention and treatment of cancer. Her research focuses upon integrating omics technologies and novel statistical methods into epidemiological studies to understand heterogeneity in breast cancer pathogenic processes and identifying novel biomarkers for tumor initiation and progression.

***Alexander Keil, PhD*** – Keil joined the faculty as a research assistant professor. He is trained in occupational and environmental epidemiology and has a strong interest in causal inference and epidemiologic methods. His research has focused upon improving the interface between occupational and environmental epidemiology and regulatory decision making. He leads projects to develop methods for targeting policy decisions.

## *Promotions*

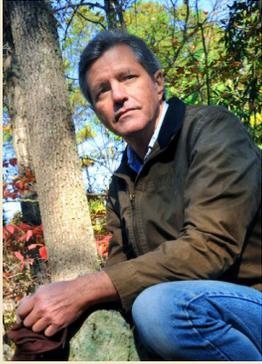
***Jennifer S. Smith, PhD*** – Smith was promoted to professor. Her research investigates the intersections of infections, cancer and women's reproductive health. She leads a randomized clinical trial to determine whether providing self-sampling to infrequently screened women in North Carolina increases cervical cancer screening completion. Her work also includes the evaluation of novel cancer diagnostics in clinical sites in Kenya, China and Brazil. Smith is the director of the Cervical Cancer-Free Coalition, a global initiative

***Julie Daniels, PhD*** – Daniels was promoted to professor of epidemiology and maternal and child health. Her research focuses upon the study of perinatal exposures that may have an impact upon children's health and neurodevelopment. She is principal investigator for the N.C. site of the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network and also the N.C. site of the Study to Explore Early Development. She is principal investigator for the PIN Kids study that investigates the association between perinatal exposure to flame-retardant chemicals and children's growth and neurodevelopment.

***Melissa Troester, PhD*** – Troester, director of the Center for Environmental Health and Susceptibility, was promoted from associate professor to professor. Her research focuses upon the molecular epidemiology of breast cancer disparities. She also studies environmental causes of breast cancer and benign breast disease.

***Amy Sims, PhD*** – Sims was promoted to research associate professor. In collaboration with several groups, she studies highly pathogenic human coronavirus infection of primary human lung cell culture models to understand the pathogen- host interaction. Future studies will continue current multi-site collaborations to identify specific host pathways critical for human coronavirus replication and to test potential therapeutic treatments. Sims also enjoys working closely with the fiscal office staff of the Department of Epidemiology.

# In memorium



Dr. Wing

**Dr. Steven Bennett Wing** was an inspiring activist for environmental justice and advocate for human rights, mentor and friend to many. He was an associate professor of epidemiology at UNC's Gillings School of Global Public Health, and a member of the public health faculty since 1985. Educated at Vassar as an undergraduate and having earned a master's degree in sociology at Duke, he completed doctoral studies in epidemiology at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1983.

His long list of honors reflects the social causes for which he worked so diligently – an award from the Concerned Citizens of Tillery and Land Loss Fund, an advocacy group for an underserved black community that has advocated staunchly for environmental justice (1997); a certificate of honor from the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability (2003); the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology Research Integrity Award (2009); the American Public Health Association Environment Section's Homer N. Calver Award (2011); the Self-Determination Award from the Black Workers for Justice (2014); and the John O. Blackburn Award, presented by NC Warn, a nonprofit organization focused on stemming climate change through advocacy for clean energy (2016).



Dr. Kaplan

**Berton Kaplan, PhD**, emeritus faculty of the Department of Epidemiology, died Friday, May 5 at Carol Woods Retirement Community in Chapel Hill. He was 86.

Kaplan, whose parents immigrated around 1900 from an area of Russia now part of Lithuania, grew up in Strasburg, Virginia, and graduated from Virginia Tech. After a stint in the Air Force, which he served at Cape Canaveral, Kaplan studied social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh but left his studies there when his father suffered a heart attack. He

“But it’s not about me,” he would say frequently. He praised community colleagues who worked to educate themselves and institute social change, and he saw himself, not as *deserving* the spotlight but rather as *being* a spotlight that helped illuminate injustice in North Carolina and throughout the country.

He trained his students to be thoughtful, respectful, committed community activists and scientists, and they remained devoted to him. He was honored with the Gillings School's Greenberg Award for Outstanding Teaching, Service and Practice (2004) and the John E. Larsh Jr. Award for Mentorship (2014). Steve was a hero to many in the Gillings School and the broader world of environmental scientists, advocates, activists, policy makers and community members in North Carolina and beyond.

Wing died from cancer on November 9, 2016. He was 64. He left behind his wife, Betsy, their daughters, Ann and Marion, son-in-law, Sam Garrett, and his beloved grandchildren. He will be deeply missed.

earned a doctorate in sociology at UNC because it was “the closest thing to social anthropology he could find.”

Kaplan joined the faculty of the Department of Epidemiology in 1960 after spending several years as a research assistant under John Cassel and teaching in the Department of Mental Health. Kaplan, who considered himself a social anthropologist, joined the interdisciplinary faculty that solidified the department's reputation for a different kind of epidemiology – what we now know as social epidemiology.

Kaplan was totally dedicated to teaching and university service. He received the Gillings School's prestigious McGavran Award for Excellence in Teaching and the UNC General Alumni Association's Faculty Service Award. He also was honored by Duke University's Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health, which established the annual Berton H. Kaplan Lifetime

Achievement Award in recognition of his work.

Kaplan leaves behind Ellen Brauer Kaplan, his wife of 58 years, and two sons, Daniel and Ron, and their families, as well as many devoted colleagues and alumni.

## Faculty awards

**Stephanie Engel, PhD**, associate professor of epidemiology, is the recipient of the John E. Larsh Jr. Excellence in Mentoring Award. The prestigious and competitive Larsh Award was established in 1997 to honor John Larsh, one of the first faculty members of the UNC School of Public Health and a professor of parasitology. The Larsh Award recognizes the one faculty member who best exemplifies the mentorship and commitment to students.

Engel is an epidemiology alumna, earning a Master of Science in 2000 and a doctorate in 2003. She teaches Biomarkers in Population-based Research and Introduction to Perinatal and Pediatric Epidemiology. Her research considers the impact of environmental exposures and innate susceptibility factors on adverse pregnancy outcomes and neurodevelopmental impairment in children.

**Sonia Napravnik, PhD**, research assistant professor of epidemiology, was selected to receive the Gillings School's 2017 Celebrate Teaching! Award. Celebrate Teaching recognizes one person from each academic unit who has inspired students; enhanced student learning through creative, engaging and innovative teaching methods; and supported students' academic success and professional development. The award includes a stipend for educational development. Faculty members especially value this award because it is based on nominations from students.

Napravnik is also an assistant professor in the UNC School of Medicine and an alumna of the Department of Epidemiology. She earned a Master of Science in 2000 and a doctorate in 2004.



*Dr. Engel*



*Dr. Napravnik*

# Social epidemiology

Dear friends of the Department of Epidemiology:



*Dr. Aiello*

It has been a true pleasure to return to UNC and work with an amazing community of scholars to enhance and expand the social epidemiology program. The Department of Epidemiology has a strong tradition of research in health equity, social justice and the social and psychosocial determinants of health. Over the last three years, we have worked to sustain and enhance these aspects of our program.

The core mission of the social epidemiology program is to train students in the concepts and methods of social epidemiology and to use this training and knowledge to study the complex relationships between the social environment and health. In keeping with our mission, we have restructured our curriculum and added new courses. We offer courses from introductory to advanced methods, and our seminars cover multidisciplinary and specialized topics. Through coursework, students are trained in areas including population perspectives, the social environment, multilevel approaches, life-course research and the influence of psychosocial stressors on health. We cover measurement issues and the construction of variables that are unique to social epidemiology. These measurement issues and variables include measurement of neighborhood social and built environments, social inequalities, social networks and statistical modeling methods derived from economics and sociology.

Social epidemiology draws on areas of research from social to biomedical science and is inherently focused on population, so we expose students to a wide array of disciplinary approaches. For example, the social epidemiology seminar course in 2016 included epidemiologists and also researchers from economics, Latino/a studies, sociology and forestry and environmental studies. Because our seminars draw epidemiology students and faculty members with a high level of expertise and training, they produce interesting and boundary-pushing discussions and create opportunities for participants to learn language, terminology and approaches from disciplines they may not have encountered.

Together, courses and seminars give our students a chance to challenge and embrace new ideas in their own research. The students' stories in this issue show how we provide interdisciplinary training and innovative research projects in social epidemiology to our trainees, so they are able to develop relevant research questions for their dissertation work.

The number of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers who work on projects that address social determinants of health, health equity and population health grows each year, thanks in part to the research of Dr. Joanna "Asia" Maselko, who joined the faculty recently. New research projects developed by faculty who have been with the department for years also expand opportunities for student research.

In the 2016-2017 academic year, several of our social epidemiology students and postdoctoral researchers have been invited to give talks, and some have received travel awards to present their work at national and international conferences. These talks and conferences are excellent opportunities for our students to hone their skills in communicating and disseminating their research.

Finally, I believe that we social epidemiologists are an inherently social group of researchers, and I look forward to celebrating the many achievements of our students together at our annual social epidemiology celebration this fall at my home in Chapel Hill.



Dr. Allison Aiello,  
Professor  
Program leader, social epidemiology

## History

Epidemiology was first taught at UNC in 1936 by Milton Rosenau, a prominent epidemiologist, four years before public health became an independent school at UNC at Chapel Hill. In the 1930s and 1940s, epidemiology meant the epidemiology of infectious diseases. John Cassel, who earned a medical degree from University of Witwatersrand (South Africa) and a Master of Public Health degree from UNC, joined the epidemiology faculty in August 1954 as its first social epidemiologist. He became the first full-time chair of the Department of Epidemiology in 1959.

Cassel was a South African native, an innovator and an influential epidemiologist who is widely credited as a shaper of social epidemiology. He came to Carolina as a graduate student to develop knowledge and skills in epidemiology and biostatistics because he wanted to understand the connections between social, behavioral and cultural factors and health – connections he had observed in Zulu communities while serving as the medical officer in charge of the Pholela Community Health Centre in South Africa.

Pholela was the first successful community-oriented primary health care center and a pilot for a network of health care centers across South Africa. At Pholela, health workers conducted community surveys, and recognized that culture, beliefs, habits and socioeconomic status – as well as prevalent conditions – affect health. Pholela was a multiracial center during the period when apartheid laws were tightening in South Africa.

Cassel planned to return to South Africa to continue his work at Pholela after completing his studies at UNC.

However, when Cassel arrived in South Africa, he found that apartheid made it impossible to do the work he had intended to do. Cassel, his wife and their young children left South Africa, fleeing the dangerous and violent climate. Edward McGavran, MD, who had served as dean of the UNC public health school and chair of the Department of Epidemiology since 1947, recruited Cassel to join the epidemiology faculty in 1954. In 1959, Cassel became chair of the department.

By 1960, Cassel had recruited an interdisciplinary faculty with expertise across the social and behavioral sciences. Within a few years, the faculty was conducting research on the relationships of industrialization, culture change, and racial and ethnic differences on health, especially their relationship with chronic diseases.



*Dr. Cassel*

# Student research



Shakia Hardy

**Shakia T. Hardy**, doctoral candidate in epidemiology, is the lead author on a study published in *JAMA Cardiology*. She is from New Bern, N.C. and studied biology and chemistry as an undergraduate at UNC, graduating with a bachelor's degree in biology. She earned a Master of Public Health degree in health policy and management at the University of South Florida and returned to UNC for doctoral studies in epidemiology.

The new research compared the ages at which African-Americans, white Americans, and Mexican-Americans transition from ideal blood pressure to prehypertension, and from prehypertension to hypertension. The researchers used three cross-sectional samples from a National Health and Nutrition Survey and identified the ages at which the probability of blood pressure transition is highest in the largest American ethnic groups. Differences in the age at which blood pressure is likely to rise emerge during childhood. African-Americans and boys transition at a younger age than other children. Women and Mexican-Americans are more likely to transition to higher blood pressure later in life. The data support the need to take steps to prevent the increase of blood pressure during childhood.

Co-authors, in addition to Hardy are Katelyn M. Holliday, Sujatro Chakladar, Joseph C. Engeda, Norrina B. Allen, Gerardo Heiss, Donald M. Lloyd-Jones, Pamela J. Schreiner, Christina M. Shay, Danyu Lin, Donglin Zeng and Christy L. Avery

*My experience as a health and nutrition specialist for Head Start broadened my perspective on how socioeconomic status, race and access to health care influence the development of adverse health profiles in early life and contribute to the development of chronic disease. I learned about the lack of evidence-based research that is needed. This deficiency led me to pursue a higher level of research skills that would enable me to generate knowledge that improves health equity – Shakia Hardy*

## 1. What do you see as unique in the research you recently published?

There are two truly unique aspects of this work – the novel methods and the critical ages identified by the findings. Longitudinal studies are ideal for exploration of risk factors over the life course. However, few contemporary, longitudinal studies exist that span from childhood to late adulthood in multi-ethnic populations. Using Markov models specifically

designed for cross-sectional data allowed us to overcome these data scarcities to estimate net transition probabilities over the lifespan. Being able to compare when transition occurs in children and in adults elucidated the missed opportunity to get ahead of blood pressure increases during childhood.

## 2. What part of your experience in the Department of Epidemiology have you found most valuable?

Dr. Gerardo Heiss is my academic adviser, and I've also worked closely with Dr. Christy Avery during my doctoral training. Their support and mentorship have been invaluable as I've developed the professional and research skills required to embark on an independent research career. **Danielle Gartner** is a doctoral student in epidemiology. She is from Michigan and received a bachelor's

**Danielle Gartner** is a doctoral student in epidemiology. She is from Michigan and received a bachelor's degree in medical anthropology and evolutionary biology at Case Western University and a master's degree in environmental justice at the University of Michigan. After completing these degrees, Gartner worked in nonprofit organizations before beginning the doctoral program.

*After working for environmental-justice-focused nonprofit organizations for six years, I realized that my favorite days were those spent “number-crunching” and designing small-scale public health interventions. So, I sought a doctoral program that would allow me to do this full-time – and here I am! – Danielle Gartner*



Danielle Gartner

### **1. What is your current social epidemiology project?**

My dissertation will focus on geographic and racial or ethnic disparities in the incidence of hysterectomy, which is the second most commonly performed surgical procedure among non-elderly U.S. women. This is an invasive, fertility-ending procedure with considerable variation in prevalence. The hysterectomy practice pattern in an area is influenced by demographic, clinical and political factors. My research aims to improve understanding of social and cultural correlates of practice in order to ensure that treatment is provided to populations with unmet need and is limited in instances of inappropriate use.

My training focuses upon building the skills to effectively leverage administrative datasets for research purposes. I see great potential in these data to provide critical public health information on hard-to-research populations including Native Americans, Hispanics and individuals who are uninsured. I am working to become able to lead efforts in identification and elimination of health inequities by race, ethnicity and geography.

### **2. Who is your adviser?**

I've worked with Whitney Robinson [PhD, assistant professor and co-leader of the social epidemiology program] since my first day at

UNC, and I'm so grateful for the mentoring relationship we've developed over the last few years. Whitney is brilliant, nice, supportive and has a good sense of humor. I'm so fortunate to get to work with her!

### **3. What interests you about this work?**

The U.S. South has particularly high rates of hysterectomy, and in North Carolina, contemporary rates are higher in areas with lower median household incomes and among women with less education than in other areas. This difference in rates is counterintuitive given that gaining access to health care is a challenge, particularly for individuals with low income. Several medical procedures are underutilized by individuals with low socio-economic status, but examples of procedures that are more frequently utilized by these individuals are more difficult to find.

### **4. What do you find valuable about the social epidemiology program at UNC?**

The people. I have found an amazing support system here. Other students challenge and inspire me to be better and try harder. They're always available to talk through ideas, lift me up when I'm down and celebrate the victories. I wouldn't have made it this far in the program without them.



Mike Fliss

**Mike Fliss**, third-year doctoral student, concentrates on social, injury and environmental epidemiology. He has worked at the intersection of epidemiology and informatics at the local and state levels in North Carolina since 2010. Fliss grew up near Chicago and Philadelphia, but he has called North Carolina home since 1999. Fliss entered the epidemiology doctoral program with expertise in several areas that shape how he sees public health issues and how he approaches research. Before coming to Carolina, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree at Duke University, graduating with a double major in computer science and philosophy. After leaving Duke, he earned a Master of Social Work from UNC in 2009, concentrating on program evaluation and management. He has earned certificates in nonprofit management from both Duke and UNC.

***What are your current social epidemiology projects?***

I'm working on my dissertation research, which involves race-ethnic inequities in police traffic stops. On the side, I'm working on environmental and injury epidemiology questions that overlap with social epidemiology. The issues include the density of alcohol retailers and inequities in populations that are exposed to them, cumulative exposure to the environmental hazards of concentrated animal-feed operations, and child maltreatment and overdose surveillance.

***Who are your advisers?***

I'm working with my dissertation committee – Frank Baumgartner [PhD, Richard J. Richardson Distinguished Professor] from the Department of Political Science, and from the Department of Epidemiology, with Steve Marshall [PhD professor] (committee chair), Charlie Poole [ScD, associate professor], and Whitney Robinson [PhD, assistant professor]. I also work with Michael Emch [PhD, professor of epidemiology and professor and chair of the Department of Geography]. I also work with local and state health departments, contacts in injury epidemiology and with community groups and nonprofits working on

environmental and tobacco exposures.

***What led you to concentrate in social epidemiology?***

I am motivated by social justice. Social epidemiology gives some tools to help think about social justice questions from an epidemiological point of view, though I think it's important to acknowledge the similarities and differences between a social-justice epidemiology and social epidemiology. I've enjoyed getting to collaborate on injury, environment and justice questions through a lens informed by social epidemiology.

***What is one thing you find valuable about the social epidemiology program at UNC?***

I've appreciated the opportunity to integrate some of social epidemiology's core tenets into the core curriculum, especially when this leads to a better examination of race, ethnicity and socio-economic position, given how frequently they show up in our models. I also look forward to an increasing acknowledgment of the way power, history and structural oppression have an impact upon modern epidemiology. I think social epidemiology can help with that shift.

*Elizabeth McClure* is a doctoral student who started the epidemiology program at UNC in 2015. Prior to beginning the program, McClure worked in advocacy and research on housing quality and health in Boston for four years and earned a Master of Science in Public Health in social epidemiology at Harvard University. Her master's thesis assessed the spatial and neighborhood-level structuring of housing quality, safety, pediatric obesity, hypertension and asthma rates. She began her university studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in biological anthropology.



*Elizabeth McClure*

**What motivated you to pursue the type of research you are doing?**

I worked with the Vital Village Network, a partnership connecting community groups focused on child opportunity in three Boston neighborhoods, and I was drawn to the work by an interest in mixed-methods research. We improved our methods reflexively through resident perspective. We also got to see our findings translated into specific organizational actions and referenced in resident testimonies to the city commission.

Stories and context feel like necessary components of quantitative findings, but I was amazed by how motivating the practicality of the work was to me.

**With which faculty members have you worked closely at UNC?**

When I came to UNC in 2015, I started working with Steve Wing, PhD. [See page 6.] I learned more about empowering communities affected by environmental injustices from working with him. Though I only got to work with Steve for a short time, his values have become a foundation

of my work. Dr. Aiello is my academic adviser now.

**What does your current research involve?**

I work with Dr. Aiello on various projects including an analysis of the lasting impacts of historic racial discrimination in housing practices on resource distribution and residents' health, as well as an assessment of spatial and temporal patterning of environmental factors and mental health in the Detroit Neighborhood Health Study. The work is reinforcing my interest in epidemiology to promote social justice.

I also work with the Durham Neighborhood Compass. It is an interactive online mapping tool for neighborhood and census blockgroup-level housing, social and economic variables. My role is to incorporate health data. I am developing the analytical questions in a group focused on gentrification and equitable housing quality. Specifically, we hope to incorporate lead exposure, which will inform my potential dissertation research.



Julia Ward

**Julia Ward** is a third-year doctoral student in the Department of Epidemiology. Ward earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish from Davidson College and a Master of Public Health in international health epidemiology from the University of Michigan. Before beginning her training in epidemiology, she taught high school Spanish for two years with Teach For America in Phoenix. She is a predoctoral trainee at the Carolina Population Center. Her adviser is Professor Allison Aiello.

Ward works with the Niños Lifestyle & Diabetes study, exploring the association between intergenerational educational attainment and depressive symptoms among Latinos living in California's Sacramento Valley. Her work also examines the mental health effects of intergenerational acculturation and the impact of neighborhood-level cultural factors on Latino mental health.

**What compelled you to work in this particular area of epidemiological research?**

Investigating the potential transmission of socio-economic position across generations compelled me to do this work. My research could indicate how poverty cycles over several generations could have an impact the health of subsequent generations.

**What is one thing you find valuable about the social epidemiology program at UNC?**

The people! I really enjoy all of the students and faculty with whom I have worked.



Erline Miller

**Erline Miller** is a fourth-year doctoral student in epidemiology from Dallas, Texas. She completed undergraduate work in sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and began her graduate studies at the University of Texas Health Science Center's Austin Regional Campus, graduating with Master of Social Work and Master of Public Health degrees. She moved from Austin to Chapel Hill to enter the doctoral program in epidemiology at the Gillings School.

*After my first epidemiology class, I knew that I was interested in learning more. Soon, my appreciation for epidemiology coupled with my background as a high school English teacher drove me to pursue a doctorate in epidemiology in hopes of improving health disparities in minority adolescent populations –*  
Erline Miller

**What are your current social epidemiology projects?**

I am currently working on my dissertation, which explores the influence of cultural, behavioral and genetic factors on cognitive decline and mild cognitive impairment of Latinos in the U.S. After I graduate, I hope to return to Texas and to continue to do aging research in Latino populations.

Additionally, I am working on a project focused upon disentangling racial disparities in breast cancer with a mediation analysis, and another project that examines associations between financial stressors during the Great Recession of December 2007-June 2009 and biomarkers of inflammation in the U.S.

**With which faculty members do you work most closely?**

I am working with my adviser Allison Aiello [PhD, professor of epidemiology and leader of the social epidemiology program] and Whitney Robinson [PhD, assistant professor and co-leader of the program].

**What about social epidemiology do you find interesting or compelling?**

Our social epidemiology program focuses on understanding social inequalities of health with rigorous methodological approaches. I appreciate that our work can translate to improving population health by reducing those inequalities.

*Lindsay Fernández-Rhodes* (MSPH, 2011; PhD 2016) is a postdoctoral scholar with the Aiello Research Group and at the Carolina Population Center. She brings expertise in cardiovascular and genetic epidemiology together with biological and socio-ecologic perspectives to her work on two Hispanic health projects: the Sacramento Area Latino Aging Study and the Niños Lifestyle Diabetes Study. Her postdoctoral training in social epidemiology and migration is supported by a research training grant from the Carolina Population Center. Her postdoctoral training is supported by a research training grant from the Carolina Population Center.

Fernández-Rhodes received an undergraduate degree in biology and a research commendation for work in electrophysiology from UNC at Chapel Hill. Then she pursued postbaccalaureate clinical research training at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Her master's work specialized on the epidemiology of reproduction and obesity among women and racial or ethnic minorities. Her doctoral research integrated genetic and social epidemiology to describe the complex determinants of obesity in Hispanic populations.

**What are you currently learning?**

I am learning to study the upstream determinants of health that set the stage for how individual genetic and epigenetic susceptibility are expressed and shape health disparities in the United States. My humble upbringing in a rural region in Pennsylvania and vibrant Mexican-American family drive my cultural humility and interest in the immigrant experience.

**What do you find especially valuable about the social epidemiology program at the Gillings School?**

The social epidemiology program is growing here, and I enjoy being a part of that process. The faculty has asked for students to give their input on classes, exams and the learning process overall, which I appreciate! We also have great faculty members in our program area. They have varied research backgrounds, and they are open to collaboration and exploring new topics. This creates a great learning environment.



*Lindsay Fernandez-Rhodes*

**What experience in the Department of Epidemiology was most valuable?**

I particularly value the collegial and collaborative environment at UNC. It has led to rewarding collaboration with investigators from Latin America, Europe and Canada. I hope to bring my global research perspective to future work within my local community.

# Student news and awards

## Ogburn named to Elon University's 'Top 10 under 10 List'



Damon Ogburn

*Damon Ogburn*, doctoral candidate, was selected by Elon University's Young Alumni Council, for the '10 under 10' List, which recognizes Elon alumni who have achieved professional success, are making a difference in their communities and support Elon as partners, advocates and investors.

Ogburn, a native of Cincinnati, Ohio, graduated from Elon with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology and then moved to Durham. There, he worked for several years at the Duke Human Vaccine Institute before coming to Carolina.

He is passionate about HIV research within minority communities and has studied the impact of structural factors on delayed entry into HIV medical care. Ogburn completed a Master of Science degree in epidemiology at the Gillings School in 2012. His dissertation focuses on the experiences and needs of HIV-positive patients in care.

### Departmental Awards

#### **Kaplan Student Publication Award**

Marissa Seamans

#### **Arrighi Scholars Fund**

Amy Huber

#### **Cornoni-Huntley Scholarship**

Grace Mulholland

#### **Dreyer Scholarship**

Greta Bushnell

#### **Kark Award for Distinguished Teaching Assistant**

Xiaojuan Li

#### **Hulka Dissertation Award**

Elizabeth Rogawski

#### **Delta Omega**

Laurel Harduar Morano

Ruth Link-Gelles

Steven Lippmann

Angela Mazul

Caitlin Murphy

Melanie Napier

Alexandra White

Rebecca Yau

Sara Jones (Academic Excellence)

Alan Kinlaw (Service)

#### **Rebecca James Baker Scholarship**

Suzanne Landi

#### **Guess-Merck Scholarship**

Laura Hester

#### **Tyroler Endowed Scholarship**

Carmen Cuthbertson

#### **James Merchant Scholarship**

Humberto Parada

### Graduate School Awards

#### **On-campus Dissertation Fellowship**

Joann Gruber

Marissa Seamans

#### **Graduate Education Advancement Board**

#### **Impact Award**

Anna Cope

### Alumni Association

#### **Tyroler Distinguished Alumni Award**

Robert Dittus

### Gillings School

#### **Moulton/Wong Scholarship**

Kristin Sullivan

#### **Cole Scholarship**

Mya Roberson

#### **Koch Fellowship**

Christine Gray

#### **Martin Moore Scholarship**

Julia War

#### **Annual Fund Scholarship**

Joyce Rhoden

#### **Gillings Merit Scholarship**

Rae Anne Martinez

Sandra Winn Green

Mya Roberson

#### **Global Travel Award**

Kaitlyn Kelly-Reif

#### **Small Scholarship**

Sarah Hoffman

# Staff news and awards

## New SPA staff

**Deborah Rothwell**, accounting technician, 4/18/2016

**Katherine Borron**, social clinical research assistant, 6/27/2016

**Kathryn Earnhardt**, social clinical research assistant,  
8/22/2016

**Stephanie Blair**, social clinical research assistant, 10/17/2016

**Paul Brewer-Jensen**, research specialist, 11/21/2016

**Nancy Culberson**, system programmer, 1/17/2017

## New postdoctoral staff

**Shannon Kapuaolaokalaniakea Gellert**, postdoctoral trainee,  
5/5/2016

**Kara Jensen**, postdoctoral research associate, 6/1/2016

**Katelyn Holliday**, postdoctoral trainee, 7/20/2016

**Humberto Parada**, postdoctoral trainee, 2/13/20

## New EPA Non-faculty

**Emily Kiser**, project coordinator, 6/27/2016

**Heather Davis**, project manager, 7/25/2016

**Linda Kimaru**, research associate, 8/15/2016

**Adam Cockrell**, research associate, 10/15/2016

**Anna Baker**, project coordinator, 12/15/2016

**Sara Smith**, project coordinator, 1/3/2017

**Sarah Doughty**, project coordinator, 1/23/2017

**Laurie Mettam**, project manager, 2/20/2017

**Elena DiRosa**, project coordinator, 4/24/2017

## Promotions

**Virginia Pate, MS**, applications analyst-advanced, 5/2/2016

**Drew Trevor Scobey**, research technician-advanced,  
3/20/2017

## Retirements

**Heena Mehta**, research specialist, 4/1/2017

**Richard Howard**, systems programmer/specialist, 4/1/2017

## Five years of service milestone

**Andrea Des Marais**

**Valerie Hudock**

**Erin Kirk**

**Tamara Watson**

**Kathryn Wisniewski**

## Pate wins Staff Excellence Award

**Virginia Pate**, applications analyst, is an extremely adept programmer with extensive expertise in biostatistics, study design and management of large databases. This combination of skills makes her a productive and valuable member of the Department of Epidemiology. She is funny, smart, optimistic and respectful of everyone with whom she works. She always maintains a positive attitude and makes students who come to her for help feel comfortable.

As one student wrote, "Without her, many of our research studies would not be possible!" Pate exceeds the expectations of students and faculty members without fail, even when they bring her challenging requests.

Pate goes above and beyond in completing routine assignments, and the department, faculty and students trust her to deliver timely and accurate results. One faculty member wrote, "Virginia has the rare quality of being excellent without the need to protect her work from others - a really outstanding team player!" Pate relishes the challenging aspects of her job and enjoys learning new skills required to solve problems. One student wrote, "I can't stress enough how deserving Virginia is of special recognition, nor how fortunate UNC is to have her working with us. If I had to describe her in one word - 'irreplaceable.'"



*Andy Olshan presents the award to Virginia Pate*



*Chyrise Bradley*



*Terry Hudgins*



*Valerie Hudock*



*Heena Mehta*

## Star Heel Awards

**Chyrise Bradley**, MA, research associate, was recognized for providing highly organized and “masterful” leadership to a large staff that is responsible for conducting a complex epidemiologic study. Bradley provides clear and meaningful goals to her staff, encourages them to learn and develop new skills and empowers them to take ownership of their roles in the project. She knows when to take charge and deal with issues she can tackle independently and when to engage with others to gain a broader perspective. Bradley was commended for setting and achieving personal goals that enhance her research knowledge and analytic skills above and beyond what is typically expected of a project manager. She is described as professional, wise, balanced, fair and consistent. These qualities win the respect of staff and investigators alike.

**Terry Hudgins**, technical support specialist, was described as helpful, kind, tireless, calm, responsive, knowledgeable and even “amazing.” These attributes are impressive, especially when taking into account his incredibly busy days. On a daily basis, Hudgins works to meet individual computing needs, and at the same time, he handles a steady stream of requests for help from individuals with computing difficulties. Hudgins was nominated for the Star Heel Award by several staff members, and the nominators always noted how generous he is with his time. They also commented that he addresses problems patiently even outside of normal business hours. We are incredibly lucky to have Hudgins in the Department of Epidemiology.

**Valerie Hudock**, assistant to the chair for graduate studies, was described by faculty, students and staff as reliable, professional, and always available. She is highly productive and goes above and beyond to get the job done. She received comments for “the amazing job she did stepping so smoothly into Nancy Colvin’s shoes, and keeping everything running and everyone on task with unfailing good humor.” She “took the reins with confidence and style.”

Students described her as “kind and very helpful providing pertinent information” and “always making sure that students are connected with the resources they need and have their questions answered, so they can be successful in the program.” She also was described as highly productive, organized and able to manage multiple projects and deadlines effectively. Staff commented on her leadership skills, teamwork and being a role model. Valerie has exceeded expectations in her role in student services.

**Heena Mehta**, research specialist, retired this year after twenty-five years of service to UNC. Mehta was a dedicated team player who met all responsibilities. She was meticulous, accurate and trustworthy. Working with her was a pleasure. She demonstrated a strong work ethic, and co-workers enjoyed working with her. One co-worker commented that “Heena is always friendly and pleasant to all of the lab’s customers, as well as others who work on the lab floor.”

# Honor roll of donors

The Department of Epidemiology welcomes and appreciates support from alumni, foundations, corporate donors and others. Your support helps us provide an outstanding education to students and maintain a brilliant and committed faculty. Your donation is greatly appreciated.

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(April 1, 2016-March 31, 2017)



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