

International Chapter Board Member Andrea Albalawi Influences the Middle East

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Andrea Braun Albalawi, MSSW 03, is living a dream she's had since sixth grade. While growing up in Harlingen, Texas, her friends called her "Andrea International". She has always been interested in all things international. "As long as I can remember, I have had a love for helping people, which I am sure I share with all other social workers. So my current work is the merger of my two passions."

Since graduating from the UT School of Social work in 2003, Albalawi has been living in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). She works as the Program Development Officer for the Foundation for Women and Children, Government of Dubai, UAE where she writes and develops all the staff and client programs, policies, procedures, and strategic plan for the organization. The Dubai Foundation for Women and Children is the first licensed non-profit shelter and services in the UAE. Her challenge: she is working in a country where there are no formalized social services.

Currently, they are in the process of formalizing social services in Dubai in hopes of being a model for others in the region. "When I moved to Dubai nearly 6 years ago, there were no social services in existence. There were humanitarian agencies providing services but not 'social work'. For years, anyone who wanted to do charity or humanitarian work gave themselves the self-appointed title of 'social worker'." Albalawi describes the perception of social work in the Middle East as a big "question mark". In her country social workers are thought of as charity workers, mere socialites who have nothing better to do, much like the way early social workers were viewed in the late 1800s in the United States.

In addition to her program development tasks, Albalawi develops research and statistics, trainings for staff, volunteers and clients, conducting groups with the clients, preparing the public awareness campaign, writing the material for the brochures and public announcements, collaborating on events, meetings with embassies, international NGO's, and other interested parties, participating in interviews with local media, and interviewing potential applicants. She is also collaborating with the Dubai Health Authority (health department) to develop Social Work licensing standards for the Government of Dubai. Albalawi is also working with Dr. Noel Busch to develop a Certificate Program in order to train and qualify individuals so that they may act as social workers.

When asked what it is like to work with the female population of Dubai "It is fascinating to work with women and children in Dubai as it is such a diverse population. Dubai is comprised of

nearly 200 nationalities. The circumstances of the cases are unique and complicated as we deal with issues of nationality, visa status, and laws.”

Albalawi stated that many aspects of the work she does was influenced by the training she received in the MSSW program at UT. As a matter of fact, it was predicted by her field instructor that she would be doing international social work. She continues to draw on lecture, lessons, and documents that she received in the MSSW program to perform her duties on a daily basis. Albalawi states “I refer to the skills I learned in the program and the guidance of the faculty to direct my practice and give me inspiration.” Albalawi also attributes the experience she gained during her field placements at Green Leaf Refugee Service Program, with the Center for Public Policy Priorities both in Austin, Texas. “I think any and all field experiences are useful and enhancing. you will never know when you will use that particular training, but it will certainly come up and you will refer back to the skills you learned in field.”

When asked what advise she would give to current students, Albalawi stated “Follow your heart and your passion and never give up. I wanted to give up so many times and go back to the states, but something kept pulling me back. Now, six years later, everything fell into place, as if it was meant to be, and I can hardly believe my eyes.” Albalawi’s dream of practicing international social work has come full circle, and now she is paving the way for social workers to follow this same path. Most recently she was appointed to the NASW International Committee Board of Directors.

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