USU Moab Social Work graduates making a difference in the community

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Utah State University Moab’s Social Work program continues to produce impactful students that make a difference in the community. Graduates Kelly Vagts and Joanna Onorato are two such individuals. Vagts has created a mental health therapy program for her school district, while Onorato has created a bilingual therapy services program.

Vagts graduated with her Master of Social Work from USU Moab. Originally from Rhode Island and Connecticut, Vagts moved to Moab in 2004 to work in wilderness therapy with at-risk children. When she decided to pursue a master’s degree in social work, she came upon the MSW program at USU Moab.

“I became part of their first cohort,” she said. “Looking at the cost of the program, plus the fact that my husband and son are here, it sealed the deal for me getting my degree in Moab.”

During her time at USU Moab, Vagts worked as an intern at a local school in the area, where she saw the need for a therapy program for students. Upon graduation, she was looking for work and ended up receiving grant funding through the Moab Free Health Clinic. Having studied school-based therapy in her time at USU, Vagts decided to start a pilot therapy program for the Grand County School District.

Beginning in Nov. 2014, the grant provided funding for two and a half years. Seeing the impact the program had on its students, the school district now fully funds the program and employs four full-time therapists. The charter school in Moab also employs a part-time therapist. All this was brought about by Vagts work. She credits her time at USU Moab and her internship while a student for helping her have success. She is now a board-certified Neuro Feedback Therapist for the school district.

“Given my circumstances of having a family and wanting to stay in Moab, I was very pleased with the education I received,” she said. “My professors prepared me well for the career that I have now.”

Onorato has seen her own success after graduating from USU Moab with her Master of Social Work. Originally from Alaska, she moved to Moab to work at the Moab Valley Multicultural Center as an English teacher and educational outreach specialist. Looking to advance in her career, but also loving the city of Moab, Onorato decided to seek her master’s degree at USU Moab, seeing it as a natural fit to what she wanted to accomplish.

“I enjoyed the independence of tailoring the program to my interests,” she said. “For example, in my practicum I worked with my supervisor to go down to the Mexico/USA border to assist asylum seekers with social work-related services. It was cool to pursue that opportunity and passion of mine and receive the support from the program.”

During her time at USU Moab, she began an internship at The Multicultural Counseling Center, helping serve the Hispanic community as their first Spanish-speaking counselor outside of Salt Lake City. Seeing the need for a Spanish-speaking mental health program, Onorato has been working with the Multicultural Counseling Center to create a bilingual, telehealth mental health program that can serve Moab and its surrounding rural communities, looking to provide the program for the underserved Hispanic population in the region. She credits USU Moab’s program with helping her achieve her dreams.

“Social work is such an important field and USU Moab is a great program,” Onorato said. “It is a great opportunity to pursue higher education without leaving your community.”

USU Moab offers both bachelor and master-level degrees in Social Work. Graduates at both levels of the program leave the school not only with a degree, but are eligible for licensure upon graduation. The program advisors also seek to assist students with job placement after graduation.
“If you are working with human beings, a degree in social work is very helpful,” said Jen Evers, Clinical Associate Professor of Social Work at USU Moab. “I think a lot of people don’t like what they see going on in the world and they want to make change, but don’t know how. The social work program helps them learn how to engage in the change process from the micro level all the way through the macro level.”

For more information on USU Moab’s Social Work program, visit aggie.link/Moab-SW.

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