# ILLUMINATED

Graduate Student Research Magazine

ETSU Graduate School, Spring 2024, Volume 12, Issue 2

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## From the Graduate School

The East Tennessee State University Graduate School is proud to present *Illuminated*, a magazine that showcases the excellent work of our graduate students and their faculty advisors. There are over 2,400 students enrolled in graduate programs at ETSU. *Illuminated* presents some of our students’ research and creative works that make meaningful contributions to various disciplines, and contribute to our strong graduate programs. *Illuminated* features research and creative projects that are currently happening on campus, and provides updates on alumni of ETSU graduate programs.

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Correction Volume 12, Issue 1, pg. 26

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## Graduate Students & Advisors

Are you excited about your research and would like to share your hypothesis or findings? You might be a perfect fit for Illuminated. There is more than one way to get into the next issue of the magazine!

For current graduate students and their advisors:

Are you or one of your graduate students working on a culminating experience (e.g., thesis, dissertation, capstone)? Your research could receive additional exposure through Illuminated magazine and help educate the rest of the campus about your department and program. This is a unique opportunity to get your work recognized!

For current graduate students and their advisors:

Did you or one of your students get into an excellent doctoral program or get an excellent position? We want to hear about it! Share your story in the “Where Are They Going?” section.

For former graduate students and their advisors:

Do you know an outstanding student who graduated from ETSU more than a year ago? We want to hear from them! The “Where Are They Now?” section features former ETSU graduate students who are now professionals in positions across the country.

Nomination Form: https://etsu.jotform.com/212844078429058

For more information on nominating students or getting featured in Illuminated, please contact: Dr. Karin Bartoszuk, [bartoszu@etsu.edu](mailto:bartoszu@etsu.edu).

# ARTICLES

## Connecting Cultures and Overcoming Adversity through Art: One Artist’s Perspective

Akintayo Akintobi, Studio Art, MFA

Mira Gerard, Faculty Advisor

For Akintayo Akintobi, art has long been a passion. Akintayo grew up in Nigeria, where he remembers having a love for art as early as age seven. Even then, the young artist found himself overcoming challenges. Paper and pencils were reserved for mathematics and reading, but he found himself fostering his love for creativity by drawing and tracing intricate patterns through the sand with his finger. While pursuing his Bachelor of Arts from Obafemi Awolowo University, he was taught strict techniques for painting, following the rules and guidelines. After graduation, he longed to experience his own vision and try something new. He found ETSU on a Google search and was impressed by the incredible work of the faculty. He was also drawn in by the resources he would have access to including the Visual Resource Center, where students can access different methods of printers, pressing, and matting their art.

Akintayo arrived in Johnson City ready to enhance his painting skills, but found himself on a journey that though challenging, would allow him to grow as an artist and a person.

Akintayo began his MFA program at ETSU as a painter. By his second semester, however, he knew he wanted to branch out and explore other materials. He credits his ability to grow in this way to Mira Gerard, his advisor at ETSU. “It’s one thing to know you want to approach things from a different point of view,” says Mira, “but it’s another thing to do it.” Akintayo’s willingness to extend into different styles and mediums shows a bravery that can be seen throughout his work. He described his process for creating art as twofold. Sometimes you begin with an idea, then gather materials and begin the work. Other times, you allow the work to take the lead, giving rise to the ideas and materials as it continues. Akintayo utilized his exceptional painting skills through much of his work; however, he also incorporated other mediums and objects, including fabric and sand. This variation reflects his growth as an artist, as well as the differences in culture he has observed since being at ETSU.

When he arrived in Johnson City, Akintayo immediately noticed a cultural contrast between his new Appalachian home and his Nigerian roots. The teaching style here was much different than what he experienced at home. The strict rules, guidelines, and narratives that he was so used to following were gone. It was the small differences in everyday life he observed here that ultimately inspired his MFA show. The project, titled “Ìlànà orí-okè àtiyanrin,” represents the challenges he faced both growing up in Nigeria and adjusting to the culture in the U.S. “Ìlànà orí-okè àtiyanrin” translates to “t(h)reading sands and mountains.” The title calls to the sands of his old Yoruba home in Nigeria, and the mountains of his new Appalachian residence. The sand and threading are also representative of the materials he used in his artwork. Underlying this meaning are the “mountains” or adversities he has had to overcome by “treading” their peaks. Many of the works in his exhibition delve into the intersection and variances of cultural perspectives, exploring identity and creativity within the dynamic context of the Yoruba culture and Appalachian culture. For example, he recalls his surprise the first time he saw a yellow school bus here. In America, everyone slows down and pays attention when a school bus stops; it is synonymous with careful and calm. These same yellow buses with the same black stripe were a different entity in Nigeria. Akintayo describes fondly a frantic ride on such a bus in Lagos back home: cramped against his neighbors with no air conditioning and jumping off the still-moving vehicle as it passed his destination. His work Lagos Bus/School Bus is inspired by this juxtaposing view of buses in both countries. Another work, titled Dinner Table, represents the difference in culture surrounding eating that Akintayo has experienced. “At home, my family all eats from the same plate,” Akintayo recalls. It is normal in Nigeria to share a meal from a single plate or bowl within families and friend groups. He compares this to the American traditions of each family member receiving their own plate of food, separate from one another. His piece, again, represents these differences intersecting, with traditional Nigerian placemats poised in the forefront of a traditional American red-and-white picnic pattern.

In addition to connecting these two cultures, Akintayo used his artwork to express the challenges he faced throughout his life. Creating his piece Cycle 1 involved dragging his fingers through sand, just as he did as a child. The spiral shaped pattern carefully drawn on a sand textured background represents what art is to Akintayo--a meditative and therapeutic experience despite outside challenges. The spiral symbolizes continuity and passage of time as the “treads” created by his fingers are retraceable--just like memories and his path in life. “You can always find your way back to where you started,” he says of the paths he’s walked as he navigated life’s trials.

Akintayo hopes his work can bridge the relationship between these two cultures despite their individual differences. He aims for his artwork to prompt viewers to increase awareness of their surroundings. The tiny details of everyday life can seem mundane, especially when you simply allow them to pass by. When you pay attention and truly start to notice what is going on around you, however, you may be surprised at what inspires you. “Until I started this work […] I did not really look into these differences,” he expressed, citing the cultural divide between Nigeria and the U.S. that ultimately inspired his work. He hopes that viewers can become more cognizant to the culture they are surrounded by.

Akintayo values the time he has spent with his advisor Mira Gerard, who he has worked with over the past two years. He credits her for teaching him that it is okay to branch out from what you know and try new things. He especially appreciated how she provided him space to express his individuality, while still pushing him to do good work. She provided him excellent mentorship without pressure to conform to her style of art. Exploring different materials was his favorite part of compiling his show. “It was challenging, it was daunting, but I think it was a good experience to try over and over again. It pushed me to create these bodies of work,” Akintayo expressed.

In addition to his culminating MFA show at Tipton Galleries in Johnson City, Akintayo has presented his show at South River Art Studios in Atlanta, Georgia. When he graduates in May 2024, he hopes to expand on his project further. He would also like to travel back to Nigeria and integrate the teaching styles he learned from his professors here as a teacher there. “Teaching is a way of giving back to the community I learned from,” he said. He is excited to share his work with his old professors and hopes to explore with his students new ways of approaching art. Whatever challenges he faces, he feels prepared to overcome them.

## Where are They Now? Emily Lu

Master of Arts in History, Year of Graduation: 2020

Why did you choose ETSU for your education?

I was interested in working with Dr. Antkiewicz on Asian history. In addition, I appreciate that the ETSU Department of History admitted me with a full graduate assistantship that financially supported my education.

What is your current position and/or research?

I am a fourth year PhD candidate in History at Florida State University. My dissertation, tentatively titled, “Toward an East Asian Utopia: Ambition and Illusion in Wartime Japanese Military Music, 1868-1945” is a study of the intersection between music and politics in Imperial Japan.

What does this position/research entail?

I will ultimately complete my dissertation and earn my PhD in History. As a candidate, I also taught East Asian History at UMass Boston for one semester. I am going to Japan for primary source research on a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship later this year.

How did your time at ETSU prepare you for this career?

ETSU gave me so many opportunities: I built rapport with my fellow colleagues; I was able to procure multiple research fundings and scholarships that helped shape me as an emerging researcher and scholar; most importantly it was at ETSU that I began to think critically and academically about music, given the popularity of folk Appalachian music in the area. This later guided my doctoral research interest in studying history through the lens of music.

What advice would you offer to current or future graduate students?

Ask for help when you need. I made sure to speak up when I needed help, and there was always help available. You do not have to go through graduate school alone—it is not easy to do so, and it is not meant to be a solo journey.

## Bridging the Gap in Patient Self-Care: The Lived Experiences of Young Adults with Type 2 Diabetes

Holly Berry-Price, Nursing, PhD

Dr. Jean Croce Hemphill, Faculty Advisor

Diabetes Mellitus (Type 2) is an ongoing problem in the United States, with up to one in ten Americans currently living with the disease according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Type 2 diabetes was long a problem of older adults, with research and resources often focusing on this population. However, the diagnosis has been increasing in younger populations. This is something that Holly Berry-Price witnessed firsthand as she worked as a nurse practitioner in an endocrinology office. She turned to the literature to search for interventions to help her young adult patients navigate their diagnosis. She found the literature largely focused on young adults with Type 1 diabetes, and much less on people with Type 2. Holly was driven to ask the question herself: how were young adults diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes defining self-care, and what obstacles were they facing in achieving it? Her dissertation, completed under the guidance of her advisor, Dr. Jean Croce Hemphill, highlights the lived experiences of this unique patient population, which she hopes will provide insight into intervention programs that young adults might benefit from.

Holly identifies herself as a lifelong learner. “I love school,” she admits candidly. It is no surprise, then, that after obtaining her BSN at Winston Salem State University and her MSN from East Carolina University, she found herself drawn back to academia. She loved the variety of programs and concentrations offered at ETSU, and their proximity to her Western North Carolina home, which solidified her choice. She knew she wanted to be a nurse when in high school, but she credits her patients as the source of her interest in Type 2 diabetes. She saw how her patients--young adults juggling endless responsibilities--struggled to manage their care while still living their lives. “I wanted to be their mom, because they’re young people,” she recollects, thinking of her own children. “But I did not know how to help them.” Holly wanted to be the voice of these patients that she found was missing from the literature. She had also learned from conversations with her patients that the tried-and-true diabetes interventions that were successful in older adults were not working in young adults. With so much missing from previous research, she found it difficult to find a starting point for a quantitative research study. Dr. Hemphill suggested a qualitative study to ask why Type 2 diabetic young adults were experiencing different outcomes than older patients, and the idea resonated with Holly. Her dissertation, entitled “Exploring the Lived Experience of Self-Care in Young Adults with Type 2 Diabetes,” is a phenomenological study highlighting the young adults’ experiences caring for themselves while living with Type 2 diabetes.

The field of nursing uses Dorothea Orem’s theory of self-care to define such activities: An action of self-care is a regulatory action that promotes an individual’s health and allows them to care for themselves. Holly sought to learn how her young adult patients defined self-care in light of their Type 2 diabetes diagnosis. She conducted interviews with 19 individuals, aged 18-30, who she recruited through ads published on social media websites. Her participants consisted of 16 Black, 2 White, and 1 Hispanic individual. Thirteen of her participants were male. The qualitative nature of her study allowed her to act as the instrument through which the patient’s knowledge could be expressed. She sought to learn about her patients’ lived experiences, a research method known as phenomenology.

From the interviews she conducted, averaging about 60 minutes in length, Holly was able to identify several themes that painted a picture of the lives her patients lived. “The overarching theme of every narrative was ‘my journey’,” Holly explained. Each participant had identified the narrative of their diagnosis as “finding out,” separating it from their perception of “navigating” the present while living with Type 2 diabetes. This theme overlapped with another that emerged among the group, and that theme was distress. The participants, as a group, struggled to envision their lives going forward knowing they now had a disease that increased their chances of an early death. “When they were first diagnosed, it generated this fear, this uncertainty. I think it changed the way they may have perceived time,” Holly described. In the midst of these new anxieties, the participants all leaned on social support to help them. While many patients leaned on family and friends, others sought support in nontraditional ways. They searched online, finding communities of others like them who were undergoing similar challenges they could learn from. This use of the internet stands apart from how older diabetic patients may have garnered the support they needed. The busy lives that the participants lived--from school to marriage, from work to raising young children--gave them a need for flexibility in their self-care, and the use of online platforms gave them that. Holly found that few of the participants had ever attended a formal diabetes education class, due to time constraints, conflicting schedules, and financial strain. An online education class, with peers like them, was something they felt they would be more comfortable with. Overall, Holly found that every participant did participate in some form of self-care. The young adults in her study sought a community with others their age who shared the diagnosis.

Holly hopes that the information she gathered can help fill in the research gaps for an increasing population of young adults with Type 2 diabetes. Evidence is showing that important health markers in diabetic patients, including glucose control, is worse in young adults. These patients experience complications from diabetes more quickly than older adults with the same diagnosis. This information can be used clinically to provide patients with coping strategies and self-care tools that can truly help them navigate their diagnosis at a critical time in their life.

Holly credited Dr. Hemphill for challenging her to think more broadly. “Being a nurse practitioner, I think very black-and-white,” she said. “Dr. Hemphill has guided me and challenged me to expand my thinking.” Branching out to phenomenology was initially outside of her comfort zone, but now she loves it. She also recognizes how nurses use phenomenology in their everyday practice as they use their patients’ experiences to guide their patient care. She credits Dr. Hemphill for getting her out of her clinician mindset and guiding her toward asking the “why” questions, and seeing the whole picture. She most enjoyed the opportunity to interview young people in her research. She loved witnessing participants open up and have the opportunity to tell their story. The experience has made her more patient and more cognizant of the challenges a patient may be facing while meeting their care goals.

Holly has already presented her research at an international conference and has been selected for a poster presentation at the American Diabetes Association conference this summer. After graduating in May 2024, Holly plans to extend her practice into primary care in Western North Carolina. She is excited to use the skills she’s learned in her PhD program in a patient care setting, and is excited to add more clinical education to her repertoire. One day, she hopes to be able to educate other nurses at the university level and connect with them the way her educators have connected with her.

## Where are They Now? Oluwafisayo Ogundoro

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies, concentration in Gender and Diversity Studies,

School of Continuing Studies, Year of Graduation: 2019

Why did you choose ETSU for your education?

Because of its affordable education and cultural diversity. Compared to many other universities in North America, ETSU offers competitive tuition rates, making it a more affordable option for foreign students seeking quality education. ETSU's campus is culturally diverse. It provides foreign students with the platform to interact with peers from different backgrounds, and gain an expansive understanding of global views.

What is your current position and/or research?

I'm currently a PhD candidate and Teaching Assistant at Mississippi State University, where I focus on studying the critical and socially relevant topic of misattributed paternity.

What does this position/research entail?

As a TA, my role entails assisting the instructor to facilitate learning experiences for students. In the classroom, I teach and grade sections in US History with students ranging from five to twenty-seven in each section. I handle administrative tasks including maintaining attendance records and advising students. My research encompasses understanding the convolutions of family dynamics, societal norms, and the effect of misattributed paternity on individuals and societies, and I'm particularly interested in exploring instances of misattributed paternity across different historical epochs.

How did your time at ETSU prepare you for this career?

ETSU played a vital role in preparing me for my PhD. I gained a strong foundation in classroom discussion, critics and creativity due to the rigorous and in-depth training I received from my department. Also, participating in GPSA, SAC of Sherrod Library, Reece Museum, etc., provided me with practical experience and opportunities to apply classroom learning to real-world scenarios. The guidance and support of my professors and mentors at ETSU have been instrumental in helping me advance both professionally and personally.

What advice would you offer to current or future graduate students?

Current or future graduate students should prioritize effective time management, seek support from faculty and peers, and engage in networking and professional development opportunities. They should seek feedback and utilize it as an opportunity for development. Graduate school is challenging, but staying focused and committed to long-term goals will help them succeed.

Anything else you would like to add:

I'd like to reiterate the importance of setting clear academic and career goals, and being relentless and sturdy in pursuing them. I believe these are crucial for success in graduate school and beyond.

## Examining the Causes of COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Among People Living with HIV

Charles Olomofe, Public Health, Epidemiology concentration, DrPH

Dr. Billy Brooks, Faculty Advisor

Vaccine hesitancy is a paradox of modern medicine. As vaccine-preventable diseases decline in a population, fewer people see firsthand the need for vaccination. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, between 2 and 20% of American people are unsure about vaccines, with rates varying from state to state. When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in 2020, many of us looked toward science to create a vaccine that could ultimately save lives. But, more than ever, some citizens displayed a mistrust of the vaccine. To date, only about 56% of Tennessee’s population has been fully vaccinated against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Charles Olomofe understands the importance of vaccination, especially for those in high-risk groups, including people living with HIV/AIDS. Individuals with certain underlying conditions are at greater risk for severe COVID-19 infection--for some, it may even be fatal. Through his dissertation, completed under the guidance of his advisor, Dr. Billy Brooks, Charles wanted to learn what factors contributed to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among people living with HIV in order to design education or intervention strategies that may save their lives.

Charles grew up in Lagos, Nigeria. He received his bachelor’s degree in Medicine and Surgery at the Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria. He sought to bridge his clinical and academic interests, earning his master’s in Public Health with an Epidemiology concentration at the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom. When he decided to pursue his doctorate, he knew he wanted to continue traveling the world, and began searching for programs in the School of Public Health Application System (SOPHAS). ETSU’s Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) program stood out for its blend of applied clinical practice and researched-focused program. Upon his acceptance, Charles found immense support from ETSU’s faculty and his host family (Julie and Casey Sears) who made him feel at home, and he knew he had made the right decision.

As part of ETSU’s DrPH program, students complete an applied practice experience with public health organizations in the community. Charles completed his fieldwork at the ETSU Center of Excellence in Inflammation, Infectious Disease, and Immunity (CIIDI), which provides care to patients with a number of diseases caused by pathogens, including HIV/AIDS. ETSU CIIDI is a Ryan White Center of Excellence, where patients living with HIV/AIDS are able to receive superior health care. While working there, Charles noticed the nuance and stigma that often accompanies HIV care. He wanted to know whether these factors would result in greater rates of vaccine hesitancy among people living with HIV.

To conduct his research, Charles began with a scoping review of the literature to discover existing information regarding COVID-19 among people living with HIV/AIDS. Charles found that HIV patients were showing a higher rate of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy than the general population. He thought this to be paradoxical given that people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) have an increased risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19 infection, but yet show higher hesitancy towards a potentially life-saving intervention like vaccines. Through his literature review, he came across many possible predictors that he hypothesized may be contributing to this vaccine hesitancy. Some patients wondered whether the COVID-19 vaccine was safe, given its incredibly fast production time. Another recurring theme was medical distrust. Patients were sometimes weary of the potential ulterior motives held by both the government and medical industries. Among people living with HIV/AIDS, Charles found that many might avoid vaccination because they did not want to disclose their HIV status, a requirement for getting the shot when the vaccine first became available. Using this global-level information he collected from the literature, he sought to determine which factors were predictors of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among people living with HIV/AIDS in Tennessee.

Using data collected by the Tennessee Department of Health, Charles first conducted a multivariate analysis to determine which factors were statistical predictors for COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among people living with HIV. Included in his analysis were independent variables age, gender, region in Tennessee (west, middle, or east), exposure risk (participation in high-risk behaviors), presence of opportunistic infection, and race. Charles used multiple logistic regression to determine if any of these independent variables were associated with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. He defined his outcome variables as a simple dichotomy: “Yes, I took the vaccine,” or “No, I did not take the vaccine.” From this analysis, Charles found that increasing age is a predictor of vaccine uptake: people over age 55 were two times more likely to have taken the vaccine than younger patients. He also determined that Black and Hispanic patients were more hesitant to take the vaccine than their White counterparts. Looking at the patients’ exposure risk, he found that patients who reported IV drug use were less likely to take the vaccine than those who with heterosexual risk exposure. Significantly, Charles found that individuals living in West Tennessee, where HIV rates were among the highest in the state, were more likely to be hesitant about the vaccine than people in other regions. He found no significant link between gender and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. In addition to his first data analysis, Charles also completed a negative binomial regression analysis using the number of COVID-19 vaccine doses as the outcome variable. Knowing that immunity from the virus increases as you take additional doses, he found this to be an important area of research.

In addition to his statewide data analysis, Charles wanted to help people at the Ryan White Center where he completed his field experience. Based on the information he gleaned from the scoping review, Charles designed a survey with a variety of questions that he distributed to 83 patients at the ETSU Ryan White Infectious Disease Clinic. Through this survey, he found a number of interesting predictors specific to our region. For example, Charles found that patients living with HIV who were regularly on HAART medications and those who had taken the “essential” vaccinations such as flu, meningococcal, and others, were more likely to take the COVID-19 vaccine. Charles hopes to be able to use this data to continue studying the potential sources of increased COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among people living with HIV/AIDS. Knowing the reasons why individuals may not want the vaccine can contribute to the creation of policies and educational interventions for both patients and health care workers that can ease their worries and help improve COVID-19 vaccination rates among such a vulnerable population.

Dr. Brooks commends Charles for his exceptional leadership throughout his time at ETSU. “He always shows up for class in a way that he’s engaged,” Dr. Brooks reflected. Charles’ independence was invaluable as he sought to complete such a difficult project. Charles was also able to link his Applied Practice Experience to his dissertation seamlessly, which is a challenge for many students. Charles’ incredible foresight allowed him to “create the opportunity for himself,” setting him apart from others.

Charles will be presenting his findings to the health care providers at the ETSU Ryan White Center of Excellence in hopes that they can utilize it in guiding their patients’ care. He hopes that the information he found can reach and help as many people as it can. After graduating in May 2024, Charles hopes to continue bridging his love for academia and clinical practice as a professor at a university. Charles is thankful to his committee and supervisors for being so responsive and helpful as he has completed his doctoral degree, especially Dr. Brooks, Dr. Megan Quinn, and Dr. Jonathan Moorman. He would also like to thank his lovely wife Funmike and children, for their support and flexibility that allowed him to finish his degree “in record time;” and his parents Mr. and Mrs. C.O. Olomofe and Engr and Mrs. M.A. Adeloye for their love and care over the years. He gives supreme glory to God for His mercy and grace. He is excited to be able to graduate from ETSU, ready to mentor, teach, and impact the lives of others.

## Where are They Now? Julianna Cole

Bachelor of Science in Human Services; Master of Arts in Counseling, concentration in School Counseling, Years of Graduation: 2021, 2023

Why did you choose ETSU for your education?

I chose ETSU, because it is home to me. I have lived in the area my whole life, and my parents and brother both graduated from ETSU. ETSU is a college that allows students to thrive and be themselves while also figuring out the world. I also chose ETSU for my Master’s degree, because it is one of the few colleges in the area that offers the School Counseling concentration.

What is your current position and/or research?

I am currently a school counselor at Johnson County Middle School in Mountain City, Tennessee. I oversee roughly 300 students and have 7th and 8th graders in my building.

What does this position/research entail?

My job entails putting students’ needs first and foremost. I make sure my students’ voices are heard by others and help them along the way with problems or issues that may arise. Middle school is a tough time and age for many, so being a person students can openly and safely come talk to is an important part of my job. I also can’t do my job alone; I work collaboratively with an amazing team in Johnson County to ensure our students are well taken care of in all aspects.

How did your time at ETSU prepare you for this career?

ETSU gave me a starting point. Through ETSU I was able to receive extensive training both hands-on and in the classroom to ensure I was ready for the field. I was also able to work closely with staff, and ask questions and for advice along the way!

What advice would you offer to current or future graduate students? Grad school is tough, but it is so worth it, especially at ETSU. At ETSU, the classes are smaller, which means you get more one-on-one time with professors, and you make life long connections to those in your cohort. Make sure you take the time to establish those connections; they will help you along the way.

Anything else you would like to add:

In the words of Dr. Borland: “Always remember to be flexible.”

## Uncovering East Tennessee’s History through a Material Lens

Slade Nakoff, History, MA

Dr. Jennifer Axsom Adler, Faculty Advisor

East Tennessee is steeped in a rich and fascinating culture. Just east of Johnson City sits Elizabethton, a city robust in Revolutionary War era history. Elizabethton, founded in 1799 by some of the earliest settlers, prides itself as the first independently-governed settlement west of the original 13 British colonies. While it is clear that Elizabethton’s history is important to the identity of its residents, less clear is what region most heavily influenced the original settlement. Many historians have argued that settlers from North Carolina brought their culture into the Northeast Tennessee region. Slade Nakoff, a graduate student at ETSU, has a different viewpoint. Through his research, Slade argues that Tidewater Virginia significantly influenced the settlement of Elizabethton and East Tennessee more broadly. In his thesis, Slade and his advisor Dr. Jennifer Axsom Adler examined the mentalities present in the Tidewater region of Virginia and how they were retained in Tennessee’s settlement through the lens of material culture.

Slade grew up surrounded by Elizabethton’s culture. He recalls the nostalgic view of the 18th century many people around him held. The city finds much of its identity in its revolutionary roots, and Slade’s interest in the history of the community reflects that. Through his childhood, he found himself in the presence of historical reenactors playing the part of revolution-era settlers. He was fascinated in the ways they dressed and engaged in the past. This paved the way to his interest in material culture, a way to study history through the physical objects of the time period.

When choosing a university, ETSU was a no-brainer for Slade. As an undergraduate honors student in History, he completed a unique thesis exploring material culture: he recreated the materials objects, including attire, in a 1760s painting of Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia. Through weaving tartan and blacksmithing a sword, Slade was able to get a true view of how these materials influenced the way of life at the time. After graduating with his bachelor’s in History, he knew he wanted to return to ETSU and complete his master’s degree to connect his love of history with his talents in writing.

Slade’s thesis centers on John Carter, one of the first settlers of Elizabethton and the root of Carter County’s namesake. Slade became fascinated with Carter while employed at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park as a seasonal interpretive recreator. While giving tours of John Carter’s home, Slade noticed how out of place the building seemed in Elizabethton. A grand house for the time, it sits near the river and is decorated with over-the-mantle paintings and details that did not quite fit with the modest log cabins of the time. Slade was inspired to look deeper into the history of John Carter, and how he influenced the settlement of Elizabethton and Tennessee.

Slade utilized a number of resources to gather data for his thesis. Through funding from the history department, he was able to take a trip to the University of Virginia and visit the Albert and Shirley Smalls special collections to view the Carter family papers. In addition, Slade explored the Washington County Archives, the Archives of Appalachia, the London Public Library, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Site, and the Winterthur Museum located in Delaware to compile the information from which he derived his argument.

Slade’s thesis utilizes schema theory to frame his argument that the Tidewater region of Virginia largely impacted the settlement of East Tennessee. The two primary schemata his work examines, those of privilege and commodification, were further subdivided into three smaller areas. Privilege was divided into inheritance, ordered society, and success. Commodification was divided into ownership, resource extraction, and speculation. Slade wanted to know how each of these ideas were uprooted from Virginia and found themselves transplanted to the region. For example, in Virginia, ownership of land was cyclical. If you improved the land, it meant you owned it. Improving the land meant resource extraction, which depleted the soil and generated a need for further speculation. Slade found a similar structure implemented by Carter in Revolutionary War era Elizabethton. Privilege in the Tidewater region of Virginia was also largely influenced by the English aristocratic model. Primogeniture, meaning the eldest son inherits the land, was a practice that made its way from that region to Elizabethton. John Carter arrived to East Tennessee in 1771 and chose to rebuild their old society using the Carter family name as a basis for his own privilege and success.

Throughout his thesis, Slade makes connections to the materials of the time as clues to the schema that structured the thought and behaviors of Carter and others. For example, an unremarkable chair that sits at the Carter mansion might easily be overlooked. Slade’s keen eye, however, caught the important details of the chair. The design at the top of the chair looks like a wagon wheel. That wheel, Slade points out, is actually a symbol for the Carter name. A carter is someone who makes carts, so to have their family crest resemble a wheel is intuitive. Carter was very proud of his name, and wanted everyone to know exactly who he was. This is a stand-out example of how material culture can enhance the clarity of historical ideas.

Slade’s thesis illustrates a shifting emphasis on the origins of migrants coming to Elizabethton in the 18th century. Rather than North Carolina, Slade believes that the artifacts from the time reflect more influence from the Tidewater region of Virginia. Slade’s project was not only unique in its findings, but in its novel approach. The incorporation of material culture into the thesis sheds light on what these historical characters were truly thinking at the time and what may have influenced their actions. Material culture allowed him to “connect with the people who created that moment in history who we might not even know their names,” Slade remarked.

Dr. Adler praises Slade as an independent learner with a sharp mind. His ability to enthusiastically dive into the community to enrich his thesis is what contributed to its success. “Slade’s project grew from his deep engagement with local history and many individuals in the community who nurtured his interests,” she states. “Everything he has done is a result of his incredible mind.” Slade credits his success to Dr. Adler’s communication skills. “She makes it easy to work through these complex ideas and figure out how to tell the story,“ Slade said of his advisor. The two easily connected over aspects of material culture, and Slade recounts that his thesis would not have been possible without her and other faculty members in the History Department.

Slade’s biggest surprise while completing his thesis was the mystery surrounding John Carter’s origins. Carter’s exact family lineage are somewhat of a mystery. Slade was hoping to discover more definitive information about the frontiersman’s origins on his trip to Virginia, but he was not able to find it. Slade has presented parts of his research at the Phi Alpha Theta conference at ETSU, as well as the Southern Appalachian Historical Conference. This year, Slade will be a featured author in the Winter 2024 edition of the Tennessee Historic Quarterly. After he graduates in May 2024, Slade hopes to pursue a PhD in History to further connect his love of history and writing. He would like to thank the entire faculty of the History department, especially Dr. Nash, Dr. Lee, Dr. Rankin, and Dr. Maxson, who helped shape his thesis and make his project possible.

## Where are They Going? Tess Ann Simpson

ABD PhD Psychology, concentration in Experimental Psychology, Year of Graduation: 2024

What are your plans after graduation?

I will be working at Maryville College in a developmental psychology tenure-track professorship.

If accepting an exciting position, What is the title of your new position?

Developmental Psychology Tenure-Track Professor

What are the primary responsibilities of your new position?

At Maryville College, I will be responsible for teaching courses, developing as a scholar and contributing to students’ scholarly development, and providing service to the college and surrounding community.

Why did you choose to pursue this position?

I found that Maryville College’s values and goals aligned well with my own personal and professional goals. First and foremost, I love teaching. Teaching psychology is a true passion of mine. So, I am excited to teach small science classes in a liberal arts context. I will also have the flexibility to pursue research and scholarship as I see fit, which opens so many doors. Generally, the position just felt like a good fit for the person I am right now. I believe that the position is also a good fit for who I might become in the next ten years.

How has your master’s degree prepared you for this position?

I truly believe the ETSU psychology’s M.A. prepared me for this position through the diligence of the teaching core. As students, we are required to teach several courses as part of our degree. Teaching those initial classes solidified my decision to become a full-time educator. Having had professors and mentors that support my development as an educator and researcher has made all the difference.

Did any professors/ advisors help you obtain this position?

Yes, my faculty advisor Dr. Wallace Dixon Jr. and my letter writers Drs. Alyson Chroust and Stacey Williams guided me as I navigated the job search and interview process. They are truly God-sent! Several other faculty members have been indispensable in my development as an educator and researcher. I cannot thank the faculty in this department enough.

What advice would you give to current graduate students who would like to enter the workforce after graduation?

My biggest piece of advice is to know your worth and values going into the process. You have done the work; you have proven yourself over and over again. The right job will come around eventually. Don’t be afraid to advocate for your needs and wants. Those are important!

## Filling the Gaps: Understanding the Level of Knowledge and Awareness about Radon Among Health Council Participants in Northeast Tennessee

Kawther Al Ksir, Public Health, Community and Behavioral Health concentration, DrPH, Dr. Deborah Slawson, Faculty Advisor

Radon is a naturally occurring colorless and odorless gas, stemming from the natural decay of the uranium found in soil. Radon can find its way into homes through cracks in the foundation. Once inside, it can wreak havoc on residents: radon is the leading cause of lung cancer among nonsmokers in the United States, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Because it is undetectable by our senses, the only way to know if you are at risk of radon exposure is to test for it. However, testing is not mandated in all states, and mitigation costs can be a burden. For doctoral candidate Kawther Al Ksir, the risks of radon fall close to home. Her mother, who had never smoked, was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer, and ultimately passed away from the disease back in 2021. Kawther’s dissertation, completed under the guidance of her advisor, Dr. Deborah Slawson, focuses on measuring the level of knowledge and awareness about radon among health council participants in Northeast Tennessee. Through her research, Kawther hopes to influence policy and advocate for increased radon testing that she hopes can save lives.

Kawther grew up in Tunisia, where she had always dreamed of getting her doctorate degree. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in nursing from the Institute of Nursing Sciences, Gabes, followed by a master’s in Health Sciences from The Higher School of Health Sciences and Techniques of Sousse, both in Tunisia. Hoping to continue her passion for health care and helping others, she wanted to complete her doctorate back home. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic affected these plans, and she put her education on hold. After meeting a faculty member who encouraged her to apply for ETSU’s Doctor of Public Health program, she decided to take a leap of faith and apply. Kawther enjoyed the idea of being able to work within the community while she earned her doctorate, an experience that ETSU prides itself on providing to its students.

Kawther was surprised to learn that radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States. In Tennessee, among other states, she found the lack of policies regulating radon, enforcing testing, and providing funding for mitigation costs disturbing. Kawther aimed to discover how much health council participants in Northeast Tennessee knew about the risks of radon. In order to complete her project, Kawther began with a scoping literature review. She found little in previous research about radon that was specific to Tennessee. In response to this review, Kawther used a validated survey to assess knowledge of radon among health council participants. She chose this population for their expertise: if anyone in the region would know about radon, it would be them. A total of 131 participants across the seven counties of Northeast Tennessee took her survey.

Through her research, Kawther discovered that only a small percentage of health council members knew what radon was. For those who knew, their primary source of knowledge stemmed from TV commercials. A few individuals had learned about radon from their realtors. Surprisingly, a small percentage of participants had learned about radon from their doctors. When asked why they had not tested their homes for radon, the participants largely stated that it was because they did not know how. This knowledge gap, Kawther argues, lies at the heart of the community’s insufficient awareness about radon.

In the third part of her dissertation, Kawther makes policy recommendations to mitigate the lack of awareness she found in Northeast Tennessee regarding radon exposure. Kawther proposes that Tennessee follows many other states in making radon professionals receive a license from the state before doing any testing or mitigation. Once radon is found in your residence, it can cost between $800 and $2,500 to make the necessary repairs, an expense that many homeowners simply cannot afford. She also hopes that the state will put in place funds to help cover mitigation costs for those who need it. She acknowledges that due to the unique geology of our state, mitigators would require specialized knowledge to protect a home from radon correctly. Kawther suggests a state licensing program so that homeowners can trust that the person working on their home lives up to Tennessee state standards.

Kawther hopes that her research is just the beginning of a much-needed effort to mandate radon regulations in Tennessee. She plans to go back to the health councils and present the findings of her research, as well as conduct an educational session that these health council participants can convey to their communities. Kawther found that working within the community was the most enjoyable part of her research. She felt her holistic experience would not have been complete without this community aspect. She credits Dr. Slawson as a contributor to her success. “It is important as a researcher and as a person, to have someone who can give me a moment to make sure I reflect,” Kawther explained. For her, Dr. Slawson was that person, reminding her to give herself grace. Kawther’s abstract has been accepted to the American Association for Cancer Research conference in San Diego, and she is excited to present her findings. She plans to pursue a postdoctoral position after graduating from ETSU in May 2024. Her advice to future students is to start looking for funds early when you have an idea for your project and not let anything hold you back from achieving your goals.

## Where are They Going? Elayna Chavis

Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences; Master of Science in Public Health, concentration in Epidemiology, Year of Graduation: 2024

What are your plans after graduation?

If pursuing a doctorate degree, What doctoral program will you be attending?

I will be attending Lincoln Memorial University – DeBusk College of Osteopathic Medicine, to become a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (D.O.).

Why did you choose to pursue a doctorate degree?

I chose to pursue a degree in medicine long before I had the education and experience to back my decision. When I was young, I faced many obstacles in my life that left me in emergency rooms for days in a row – missing out on school and so many opportunities that I couldn’t participate in. However, through my adversities, I was able to see firsthand the impact a physician had on people’s lives and knew that I wanted to be a part of that experience. Since then, I have dedicated my studies to becoming a physician – including my Bachelor’s and Master’s to enhance my healthcare perspective.

Will you be expanding on the topic you have worked on during your master’s?

While I will not be directly expanding on epidemiology in public health, my background on the topic has sustained my interest in specializing in allergy and immunology for the future.

Will you be receiving funding?

I have not received any funding from LMU-DCOM directly, however I do plan to receive funding from other resources.

How has your master’s degree helped you thus far?

Although I have learned a lot of biostatistical calculations and epidemiological methods in research, the most significant thing my master’s degree has taught me is how population and community health factors play a critical role in individual healthcare, and how attentive physicians must be of a patient’s surroundings and environment to detail their care more effectively to their specific needs.

What professors/ advisors were instrumental in helping you?

There are so many professors and advisors at ETSU that have been instrumental in my journey and guiding me to where I am today. For my undergraduate degree, Dr. Fox had a significant impact on my love for immunology and microbiology in the healthcare field. His microbiology course pushed me towards that specialty, but his advice on medical school and passion for science in itself gave me the confidence to pursue medicine at a time when I thought it was impossible. Dr. Schrift also had a significant impact on my decision – her course of Medical Anthropology and her consistent mentorship in research, I was able to discover that healthcare and medicine go beyond the science and focus so much more on the person in front of you.

What advice would you give to current graduate students who would like to pursue a doctorate degree?

The pursuit of another degree after four to six years or more may be daunting, but trust in yourself and know that everything you do is for a greater purpose. I knew that I could do more with my degree with the drive that I had – and while I am incredibly grateful for my experience in my MPH, I know that all the knowledge I have received will only allow me to grow and flourish more in my doctorate degree. Keep moving forward and push yourself to your greatest potential!

Anything else you would like to share?

God has allowed me to follow this career path and achieve the successes I have so far!

## Expression through Semiotics: How Symbols Portrayed in Mass Media Can Reflect a Personal Narrative

Delaney Rogers, Studio Art, MFA, Vanessa Mayoraz, Faculty Advisor

Semiotics is the systematic study of signs, symbols, and their interpretations in linguistics and other communication systems. This realm of study involves analyzing how signs convey messages to their viewers. For Delaney Rogers, a Master of Fine Arts candidate at ETSU’s College of Art and Design, semiotic analysis allows her to express internal and external struggles in her own life by holding a mirror to the symbols in the world around her. In her thesis show, titled “Endo/Exo,” Rogers examines how symbols used in mass media can portray narratives about the external world and her own life’s narratives.

Delaney has always been a lover of the arts. She was active in her community theater from an early age. Her art teachers fostered her ambitions as a high school student, introducing her to several different mediums. After being given opportunities to show and compete with her work, she knew that visual art was the path for her. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky, before pursuing her master’s at ETSU. Delaney’s decision to seek further education is influenced by her passion for visual arts and her love for teaching. ETSU’s MFA program would foster that love. Through a departmental GA position, MFA students have the opportunity to teach undergraduate art classes in the Art and Design Department. Delaney was drawn to the program’s interdisciplinary approach, which includes extended media, fibers, metals, drawing, printmaking, painting, sculpture, and ceramics to give students a well-rounded experience. She also values that she can create genuine relationships with professors due to the intimate size of the program.

At ETSU, Delaney completed her thesis show titled “Endo/Exo.” She describes her work as an onlook into internal and external issues. She examines how external struggles, such as social pressures, are processed internally, using narratives from her own life intertwined with references from pop culture. Delaney’s work focuses heavily on using symbols to convey her message. As she conducted research for her work, she examined how symbols we see in everyday mass media can be representative of her own life story. She began with the smiley face, a pervasive symbol in our culture that represents happiness and politeness. She expanded to less apparent symbols, like the bear. The Teddy bear originated in the early twentieth century after President Teddy Roosevelt famously refused to kill a tied-up bear on a hunting trip. Since then, the bear has symbolized innocence and morality in our society. Gummy bears, a sugary sweet treat, are omnipresent in popular culture, with jewelry and lampshades now bearing the iconic image. Delaney explores the darker, consumerist underpinning of the bear symbol, too. For example, shaping candy and other consumables like a bear to sell more. Rogers considers the bear a representative of herself: we make ourselves consumable for the public despite the internal struggles we may be going through. Soon, Delaney saw her own narrative in other symbols: a gummy worm for days she feels uneasy and going through ups and downs, a circus peanut when she feels “nuts,” and a Swedish fish for when something in her life seems a bit fishy. Delaney was able to masterfully weave these symbols into her artwork to tell the story of life’s struggles through a semiotic lens.

Creating her artwork was symbolic; she used a technological medium to tie into her media-driven theme. She converted a vinyl cutter into a pen plotter to produce her work. By designing and 3D-printing a pen holder to replace the usual blade holder in the vinyl plotter, she modified it to fit her specific needs. She created drawing files in Adobe Illustrator using vector graphics for her artwork. The pen plotter then translates these images onto paper. Her printmaking process involves the repetition of her designs, reflecting rumination over the issues she explores in her art. Her process is meticulous and involves much trial and error, and she typically ran a scrap through the pen-plotter first. Using technology to create her artwork adds a supplementary layer of meaning and echoes the technological filter through which we most often communicate as a society.

Delaney’s favorite part of her project was the creation of the artwork itself. “There is a process of play involved,” she recalled. Getting to work alone in the studio space and exploring the library of symbols she’s created is integral to the success of her work. The ability to spread out her work and think is something she values. “It is like taking a deep breath, like a moment of relief,” she described. Delaney is thankful she can access a spacious and fully equipped studio space to work at ETSU. Her advisor, Vanessa Mayoraz, has seen Delaney’s drive to succeed firsthand. “As a mentor, you want to guide a student but don’t want to impose on them.” Vanessa admires how Delaney tackled a topic as complex and stereotypical as emoticons and symbols without becoming cliché and created a series of works that went beyond a trite interpretation of contemporary life. From her admissions interview, she could see that Delaney was curious, fearless, and driven, a perfect formula for a successful creative career. It has been a pleasure for her to see Delaney’s work mature, and she is very proud of the body of work Delaney has created for her thesis show.

Delaney’s thesis exhibition took place from March 25 to April 12, 2024, at Tipton Gallery in downtown Johnson City. After graduation, Delaney will continue doing what she loves: teaching. She will apply for art shows and residencies to increase her experience and visibility. Delaney hopes that her viewers will reflect on their internal and external struggles via her reinterpretations of this popular, recognizable language of signs. She leads by example in expressing these issues and hopes they will enjoy doing the same.

## Where are They Now? Andy Berry

Master of Science in Allied Health, Year of Graduation: 2023

Why did you choose ETSU for your education?

I chose ETSU for my education due to its proximity to my community, allowing me to stay connected while pursuing my academic goals. The Allied Health Department was a significant factor in my decision, offering exceptional programs aligned with my career aspirations. Additionally, as an employee of ETSU, I have witnessed firsthand their commitment to quality education, fostering a belief in the institution's values and the enriching learning experience it provides.

What is your current position and/or research?

Manager, Section of Medical Education / Center for Experiential Learning at Quillen College of Medicine

What does this position/research entail?

The position of Simulation Manager entails overseeing and managing the high-fidelity simulation program. This includes coordinating simulation activities, collaborating with faculty to design scenarios, maintaining simulation equipment, and ensuring the effective use of simulation technology in medical education. As simulation manager my focus is on creating a realistic and immersive learning environment for medical students through high-fidelity simulations.

How did your time at ETSU prepare you for this career?

My time at ETSU provided me with a solid foundation of knowledge in my field, improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and cultivated effective communication and inter-professional abilities. The coursework equipped me with practical experience, while collaborative projects improved my teamwork and adaptability. Ultimately, my time in graduate school provided me with well-rounded preparation for the complexities of my career.

What advice would you offer to current or future graduate students?

Manage your time effectively, balancing coursework, research, and personal well-being. Stay proactive in networking and building professional relationships.

## WHEN THE WATER GOES DOWN

Patrick Cooley, Appalachian Studies, MA, Film certificate; Jacob Higgs, MS, Brand and Media Strategy, Film certificate; Professor Shara Lange, Faculty Advisor

For many students, pursuing higher education brings more than just another degree. Graduate programs often bring students from diverse backgrounds together in ways that may not otherwise have been achieved. This was certainly the case for ETSU alumnus Jacob Higgs and current graduate student Patrick Cooley. Though their educational backgrounds differ, their time as students pursuing the Film Production Graduate Certificate in ETSU’s Department of Media and Communication brought them to come together to create a documentary film highlighting the aftermath of severe flooding in Breathitt County, Kentucky. The film not only brought awareness to the needs of a small town in rural Kentucky, but it also brought Jake and Patrick together, creating what they hope will be a lifelong friendship and professional partnership for future projects.

Jacob grew up in Elizabethton, and hoped to pursue a career that allowed him to stay in the Appalachian region. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Radio/TV/Film in 2020 from ETSU’s Department of Media and Communication. Graduating in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic left him feeling unfulfilled professionally. After working for several larger productions, he wanted to hone his skills in more areas than solely camera work. He decided to pursue his MA in Brand and Media Strategy, which would allow him to “get his feet wet” in other areas of the media landscape.

Patrick received his undergraduate degree from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where his focus was on media production, criticism, and English literature. Patrick first came to ETSU as the executive aid of the Sociology and Anthropology department. As an employee, he is able to take one free class every semester, and he wanted to choose a degree that fit into his interdisciplinary background. For him, a master’s in Appalachian Studies felt like the perfect blend of a unique program that fit his interests.

Though pursuing vastly different master’s degrees, both Jacob and Patrick were concurrently pursuing a Graduate Certificate in Film Production. For Patrick, the certificate seemed like the perfect compliment to his master’s thesis on the film representation of Appalachia. Jacob already worked on film production outside of school, so the certificate allowed him to do what he loves within the scope of his education. The graduate certificate consists of three core classes and one elective. Most students are able to complete the elective as part of their respective master’s degree. The certificate program ultimately brought Patrick and Jake together, and allowed them both to highlight their strengths, and create a moving and important documentary.

Their short film, titled “When the Water Goes Down,” highlights the aftermath of the severe flooding that occurred in Breathitt County, Kentucky in July of 2022. They hoped to highlight what happens after tragedy strikes a small town when large news organizations leave and the coverage stops. In conjunction with two journalists, they set off to Breathitt County in November of 2022. They spent three days in Kentucky, conducting interviews on whim and gathering as much footage as they could. They credited the people of Breathitt County with some of their success. “Even the people who did not want to be interviewed were helpful in suggesting other places to go get interviews,” Jake described. “They wanted their story told.” The group managed to interview around nine people within those three days, including local and state politicians, local church leaders, and community members affected by the flooding.

The crew wanted to ensure that the voices of the people in Breathitt County were heard. As a form of observational storytelling, they included very little narration and textualization in the film; they wanted the footage to speak for itself. The flood had only occurred four months prior, but already, resources that had been donated were dwindling. Many people found that they did not qualify for relief from FEMA, as they lived on land and in homes that had been passed down for generations, but they did not have the “proper” paperwork to receive the aid they so desperately needed. Immediately following the flood, they got a wealth of food and supplies donated. However, due to the infrastructure of the land being destroyed by the power of the surging water, they had nowhere to put these donations. The crew found that the community was still in need of food, supplies, and blankets as they struggled to rebuild their community.

Jacob and Patrick hoped that the film would bring attention to the small town that still desperately needed help. The small community in eastern Kentucky was so often looked over. They needed infrastructure improvements not only to recover from the flood, but to prevent such devastation from happening again. They also hoped to teach the community that documentary films are not only sources of strict fact, but a place where many forms of art intersect. They hoped to convey not only fact, but emotion and visual representation. “When the Water Goes Down” is available for viewing at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4MyqyGKBRA.

Jacob and Patrick credit the interdisciplinary approach of the department for their film’s success. Patrick’s skills allowed him to create a written narrative of the film, while Jacob’s cinematography expertise allowed him to get the visually compelling shots. For both students, the ability to interview true victims of the flooding impacted them the most. “The interviews give a lot of substance, even watching it now,” Patrick says of the film. “We were in people’s homes that they were in the middle of rebuilding. That’s very intimate,” Jake echoed. They each have a new respect for the area, and hope that other people will feel the same way after watching the film. They also feel that the work impacted them, as they pursue future endeavors. For Jake, he feels the project helped him become a more well-rounded producer as he used many of the skills he uses in his current role in video production. The fast-paced nature of the film’s production helped him make connections faster as he edits. For Patrick, his work on this film was the first time he had ever done anything that was strictly a documentary. He values the creative control that the medium gave him, as well as the responsibility to the people he is representing in the film. He has a new appreciation for documentaries that he hopes to carry with him into the future.

Professor Shara Lange, the Director of the Graduate Certificate in Film Production, was instrumental in creating an environment where such a collaboration is possible. “My job is to create a community where these interactions and connections can happen,” she describes. She feels that the framework provided by the Film Production certificate gave them much-needed structure and guidance without sweltering their creative freedom. Professor Lange gives credit to the two filmmakers for their success. “Jake has done such a great job, because he has created a lot of films. Patrick is smart, organized, and a born producer.” She also commends them for getting their film out there. “When the Water Goes Down” has been featured at the Southern Studies Conference in Montgomery, Alabama; the University Film and Video association in Savannah, Georgia; and the Appalachian Studies Association.

Since graduating in 2023, Jacob has used his education in his employment with Creative Energy, an advertising agency. After his graduation in 2024, Patrick hopes to continue exploring filmmaking. The pair are currently in pre-production on another film, this time an Appalachian gothic narrative. They are thankful for ETSU’s Film Production certificate for bringing them together and allowing them to use their different strengths to send a message through film.

## Where are They Going? Cristobal Razo

Bachelor of Science in Human Services, completing Master of Science in Individual, Family, & Community Science, Year of Graduation: 2024

If accepting an exciting position, What is the title of your new position?

Several months ago, I enthusiastically embraced the role of Foster Parent Trainer with the Department of Children Services, fueled by a deep passion to empower aspiring foster parents. Beyond being a job, it's a commitment to shaping the future of foster care through education and compassion.

Why did you choose to pursue this position?

Looking forward, I see myself climbing the professional ladder in the foster care domain, eager to take on more responsibilities and challenges. I envision a path that includes becoming an adjunct professor, sharing my practical knowledge with future professionals in the field. In every foster care training session, I am reminded of the resilience within the human spirit, and I am excited about the journey ahead, which promises not only personal growth but also meaningful contributions to the foster care landscape.

How has your master’s degree prepared you for this position?

This academic journey has been nothing short of amazing. It's like stepping into a whole new world of discovery and growth. It's not just a degree; it's an adventure, a human experience that's shaping not just my career, but who I am becoming.

Did any professors/ advisors help you obtain this position?

Embarking on the journey towards my master's degree has been a profoundly transformative experience, and I am deeply indebted to the incredible professors who guided me with unwavering support. Dr. Cockerham, Dr. Brown, Dr. Garris, and Dr. Novotny have been more than educators; they have been beacons of inspiration, motivating me to take this significant step forward in my academic pursuit. Their kindness and genuine concern for my success created a nurturing environment where I felt not only seen but also valued. It's not just about the wealth of knowledge they shared, but the profound impact of their motivation that has propelled me through challenges and uncertainties. Their belief in my potential has fueled my determination to overcome obstacles, and I am forever grateful for the emotional and educational foundation they've laid.

What advice would you give to current graduate students who would like to enter the workforce after graduation?

Diving into the world of higher education is like embarking on a wild adventure; it's thrilling, but it takes time and a whole lot of patience. Trust me, there'll be moments when you feel like you're drowning in complex assignments and drowning in doubt. But here's the real deal; you've got to believe in yourself. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do it. You're capable of more than you think. It's okay if things don't click right away; give yourself the time to grow. You might stumble, but that's just part of the journey. Keep that patience alive, embrace your journey, and let your inner belief be your loudest voice. Remember, you're not just pursuing a master's degree; you're uncovering your own incredible potential. Keep at it, and you'll come out on top. You've got this!

Anything else you would like to share?

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my wife, parents, and close friends for being unwavering pillars of support throughout this incredible journey. Your belief in me has been the driving force behind every step, every challenge, and every triumph. Thank you, my dear wife, for your enduring love, understanding, and encouragement; you are my rock. To my parents, your guidance and belief in my potential have fueled my determination, and I am profoundly thankful for your unwavering support. To my close friends, your encouragement and shared joy in my successes have made the journey all the more meaningful. Your collective presence has been a constant source of strength, and I am truly blessed to have each of you by my side. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine, and I am forever grateful for your belief in me.

## Provider Perceptions of the Homelessness Epidemic in Tennessee

Opal Frye-Clark, Public Health, Health Management and Policy concentration, DrPH; Dr. Amal Khoury, Faculty Advisor

The number of people experiencing homelessness has skyrocketed in recent years. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, nearly 8,000 Tennesseans have no shelter on any given night, 400 of those individuals being in Northeast Tennessee. As pandemic-era government relief programs end, that number is only expected to climb. At ETSU, doctoral student Opal Frye-Clark has witnessed the effects of homelessness first hand. Through her dissertation, completed with her advisor Dr. Amal Khoury, Opal hopes to shed light on how providers working directly with the unhoused population of Johnson City perceive the epidemic of homelessness. Through this work, she hopes to influence policies in the state to better support those in need.

Opal has always been drawn to helping others. After receiving her Bachelor of Arts in Humanities from Kansas State University, she found herself in East Tennessee working as a licensed practicing nurse. As a home health nurse, she specialized in providing care to pediatric hospice patients, many of whom needed medically complex care. Many of the families she helped were experiencing some level of poverty. “There is a never-ending way to address someone’s needs when they’re experiencing that level of poverty,” Opal recalls, citing this feeling of helplessness that led to a switch in specialty. She saw the same situations as a behavioral health navigator in a rural emergency room--many repeat patients who needed help, but did not have the resources to get it. She could see the results that poverty and homelessness had on people’s health. It was not until the COVID-19 pandemic, when she was furloughed from her behavioral health job, that she had time to think about addressing it.

Opal saw ETSU’s Doctor of Public Health program as a way to comprehensively address the root of the problems she had seen as a nurse in a way that she could not before. Admittedly, she chose ETSU for its proximity; she was excited to find that it was also an excellent school of public health. Particularly, she valued the program’s Applied Practice Experience, or APE, which allows doctoral students to complete 300 hours working hands-on with a community organization. She valued this opportunity to give back to the community she loves, and was excited to be able to do so at ETSU.

Before beginning her project, Opal completed an immense amount of research in what she called a “vacuum” approach-- she consumed as much information as she could, both in her didactic courses and in her own time. By choosing the population she wanted to work with early on, Opal was able to leverage her courses to build the knowledge set she would use to complete her dissertation. She found that this allowed her to view the topic from a variety of different angles, an asset she would need when partnering with diverse members of the community. Through her examination of the literature, Opal found that homelessness is typically branded as an “urban” phenomenon. Very little research had been done on homelessness in a rural setting, like much of Northeast Tennessee. While Johnson City itself is not rural, it is surrounded by “the vastness of rurality,” representing a gray area in the literature that she hoped to fill.

Opal’s research aims to examine service provider perceptions of the existing systems serving individuals experiencing homelessness in Johnson City. She hoped to paint a picture of attitudes, practices, and needs of providers serving people experiencing homelessness in the city. The service providers Opal was interested in included those in direct service positions-- physicians, nurses, social workers, and others--as well as the individuals managing them, and those creating policies that affect them. She interviewed 27 individual service providers as part of her qualitative study. She was able to combine this research with her APE, which she completed with the Johnson City government. Through her interviews, she hoped to identify strengths of the community as well as barriers to addressing the needs of those experiencing homelessness in Johnson City.

Through her qualitative study, Opal identified several themes emerging from her interviews. First, she found that service providers agreed that the Johnson City government needs to have a clearly defined role in the reduction of homelessness. This is often a topic of controversy, as many individuals feel that the government should not play a role in social services. However, Opal’s research reveals that this idea was present across all levels of stakeholders, from city level to statewide. Currently, there is no clear definition of the extent to which the government should be involved in social services; Opal identified that providers feel there should be. The next theme identified was that ineffective policies at the local, state, and federal levels are preventing individuals from getting affordable housing. Such policies exist at all levels of government, from city to federal. “All these different layers of policy throw a wrench in the machine of trying to get people the help that they need,” Opal says. Finally, Opal identified a need to bridge service gaps to provide people experiencing homelessness with holistic, long-term care. People experiencing homelessness need access to a variety of resources to support their physical and mental wellbeing, and according to Opal’s findings, Tennessee is not currently doing enough to provide these resources.

Opal’s research is not done yet. She plans to use the themes identified in her interviews to construct a survey for stakeholders in the community. These survey findings will then be triangulated in a mixed-methods study to create a comprehensive needs assessment of the community, which she hopes to use to build a comprehensive plan to address homelessness in Johnson City. Ultimately, she hopes to develop and disseminate a strategic plan that will reduce homelessness in the region. She also hopes to fill the gap in the literature on rurality and homelessness. Most research on the topic has been done in primarily urban settings; with such a complex issue, she feels it is important to fill in these research holes.

Opal presented the qualitative portion of her research to the Johnson City government and the community at large in 2022, and received great feedback. As she continues crafting her dissertation, she feels that it is important to disseminate her research as far as she can in order to make the greatest impact. She will be presenting at the First Tennessee Area Aging Conference in Kingsport, Tennessee in May 2024. She credits her advisor Dr. Khoury with ensuring her work is received well by her community stakeholders. “I do not come from a traditional academic background,” Opal says. “I think that works to my benefit, but it also means my work needs a level of refinement to be functional in an academic setting.” Dr. Khoury was instrumental in helping her achieve a well-rounded and well-received final product. In turn, Dr. Khoury has learned a lot from Opal, particularly about the intersection of structure and policy. She is very proud to work alongside such a motivated student. “It has been a joy and a privilege to serve in this role as advisor to Opal and to learn more with her about this important area,” Dr. Khoury said. Opal plans to graduate in December of 2024, and while she has no concrete plans yet, she hopes to continue making an impact in her community.

## Where are They Now? Bright Kwaku Manu

Master of Science in Mathematical Science, Year of Graduation: 2023

Why did you choose ETSU for your education?

I chose ETSU because of the Mathematics and Statistics department’s program structure and content, outstanding faculty, and their research areas, and how it prepares students for future endeavors. I saw ETSU as a very diverse community where international students feel a great sense of belonging and I eventually experienced it during my time at ETSU.

What is your current position and/or research?

I am currently a research assistant in the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering’s Lab V2, here at Arizona State University.

What does this position/research entail?

Research in Lab V2 is largely focused on the application of scientific ideas at the intersection of machine learning and symbolic AI to enhance intelligence systems in a large variety of domains including autonomy, supply network analysis, and several others. I am involved in research which looks at integrating large language models and knowledge graphs with logic.

How did your time at ETSU prepare you for this career?

My time at ETSU has been one of the best times in my educational pursuits. ETSU provided me with all the support that I needed to be successful in my next endeavor. Dr. Jeff Knisley, my thesis supervisor and mentor helped me discover my research capabilities, and gave me opportunities and challenges to improve upon myself. I would like to say thank you to him, Dr. Robert Gardner, Dr. Michelle Joyner and Dr. Rodney Keaton, my graduate coordinator, for their immense support and contributions towards my success at ETSU. I believe that where I am right now can only be attributed to God’s grace, the support of these people and the entire ETSU community.

What advice would you offer to current or future graduate students?

I believe ETSU is one of the great schools anyone can think of attending. I would advise anyone wanting to have a great educational experience to choose ETSU. To current graduate students, make the most out of the precious numerous opportunities and resources that ETSU provides to its students and community to aid in their success.

## Where are They Now? Olusegun Olatunji

Master of Arts in History, Year of Graduation: 2023

Why did you choose ETSU for your education?

Because of its affordable education and cultural diversity. Compared to many other universities in North America, ETSU offers competitive tuition rates, making it a more affordable option for foreign students seeking quality education. ETSU's campus is culturally diverse. It provides foreign students with the platform to interact with peers from different backgrounds, and gain an expansive understanding of global views.

What is your current position and/or research?

I'm currently a PhD candidate and Teaching Assistant at Mississippi State University, where I focus on studying the critical and socially relevant topic of misattributed paternity.

What does this position/research entail?

As a TA, my role entails assisting the instructor to facilitate learning experiences for students. In the classroom, I teach and grade sections in US History with students ranging from five to twenty-seven in each section. I handle administrative tasks including maintaining attendance records and advising students. My research encompasses understanding the convolutions of family dynamics, societal norms, and the effect of misattributed paternity on individuals and societies, and I'm particularly interested in exploring instances of misattributed paternity across different historical epochs.

How did your time at ETSU prepare you for this career?

ETSU played a vital role in preparing me for my PhD. I gained a strong foundation in classroom discussion, critics and creativity due to the rigorous and in-depth training I received from my department. Also, participating in GPSA, SAC of Sherrod Library, Reece Museum, etc., provided me with practical experience and opportunities to apply classroom learning to real-world scenarios. The guidance and support of my professors and mentors at ETSU have been instrumental in helping me advance both professionally and personally.

What advice would you offer to current or future graduate students?

Current or future graduate students should prioritize effective time management, seek support from faculty and peers, and engage in networking and professional development opportunities. They should seek feedback and utilize it as an opportunity for development. Graduate school is challenging, but staying focused and committed to long-term goals will help them succeed.

Anything else you would like to add: I'd like to reiterate the importance of setting clear academic and career goals, and being relentless and sturdy in pursuing them. I believe these are crucial for success in graduate school and beyond.

## Where are They Now? Gregory Odey

Master of Arts in History, Year of Graduation: 2021

Why did you choose ETSU for your education?

I chose ETSU because of its outstanding educational system which provides full support for international students. Additionally, I was attracted the friendly environment at both the university and the city.

What is your current position and/or research?

Assistant Project Manager – New Jersey Black Heritage Trail.

What does this position/research entail?

Monitoring and implementing of program policies and practices, coordinating program public events, drafting program contracts, attending site visits, and also drafting and sending press releases for the program newsletters.

How did your time at ETSU prepare you for this career?

ETSU prepared me for my career in numerous ways. First, the research skills I acquired during my thesis research have had a significant impact on my professional life. ETSU offered me a valuable opportunity to not only learn, but also to appreciate the diverse social perspectives in America, which subsequently shaped my world view. Additionally, the extracurricular activities on campus, particularly my role as President of Shades of Africa (African Students Organization), provided me with a platform to enhance my knowledge in programming, public event planning, organizing and management. The combination of all the knowledge and experience gained, both inside and outside the classroom contributes greatly to the success of my career responsibilities.

What advice would you offer to current or future graduate students?

To take advantage of the unique opportunity of being ETSU students to learn both in the class room as well as volunteer for campus organizations. These experiences will pay off after graduation, particularly in their careers.

Anything else you would like to add:

I am currently volunteering as the National Focal Point for the United International Federation of Youths for Water and Climate in the US. Additionally, I am a member of the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youths (UNMGCY), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Youth Constituency, and the United Nations Water Youth Constituency. In my role as the National Focal Point of the UN Federation of Youths for Water and Climate in the US, I have presented interventions at various forums, summits and conferences held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, providing inputs to member states. I have also contributed to global youth statements that have fed into the overall outcomes of the High Level Political Forum, SDG Summit and Summit of the Future at the United Nations. Furthermore I have contributed to the national youth statement for the Local Conference of Youths (LCOY) in Washington DC that also fed into the outcomes of the Conference of Parties (COP28) and was also requested by the US Department of State.

I have also founded an organization called the Gregory Odey Water Foundation ([www.gowaterfoundation.org](http://www.gowaterfoundation.org)) with a scope of service in Nigeria. The foundation is committed to promoting the United Nations SDG 6 and SDG 13. Our primary objective is to ensure that rural communities in Nigeria have access to clean, and safe drinking water.