

## School News

# An INCLUSIVE WORLD

New interdisciplinary center broadens  
disability studies research



*Syracuse University's new Center on Disability Studies, Law, and Human Policy hosted a February campus visit by Luis Benigno Gallegos Chiriboga (second from left), the permanent representative of Ecuador to the United Nations in New York. Also pictured are (from left) education professors Steven Taylor and Beth Ferri and law professor Arlene Kanter.*

Imagine a world with no stairs, where doorways are wide, countertops low, and curbs cut into clear pathways. More noticeable than its physical appearance, this world embraces all people and their unique strengths and impairments as simply part of what it means to be human. This diversity enriches society and challenges others to expand their perceptions and to experience the world with a new set of paradigms. "This is my world," says Liat Ben-Moshe, a doctoral student in sociology earning a certificate in disability studies through the School of Education who uses a wheelchair. "I know that people consider me to be different, but I also know that's only because of what they believe normal is. And what they believe to be normal is socially constructed. It's not inherent in me. It's a social construct, and therefore, I can change it."

“I know that people consider me to be different, but I also know that’s only because of what they believe normal is. And what they believe to be normal is socially constructed. It’s not inherent in me. It’s a social construct, and therefore, I can change it.”

—LIAT BEN-MOSHE

Israeli native Ben-Moshe and a growing number of students worldwide are coming to Syracuse University to do just that: They are revolutionizing the way the world perceives and interacts with people with disabilities. Building on its long history in disability rights teaching, research, and advocacy, the University developed a new Center on Disability Studies, Law, and Human Policy. The new center expands the work of the School of Education’s 34-year-old Center on Human Policy by pulling together people from many disciplines to study disabilities as they relate to all aspects of life.

“The center will examine the conditions necessary for the optimal development of every citizen in the least restrictive environment,” says Dean Louise Wilkinson. “We need to further research and create new knowledge to inform our policies, law, and practices. We also need people to interpret and apply the knowledge to make our schools, our factories, our religious institutions, our families, and our governments more responsive to individuals with disabilities. We need to evaluate what kind of a job we’re doing so we really meet the spirit of our democracy. Who better to do that than Syracuse University, which pioneered the entire field of disability studies?”

In 2001, the need for a multidisciplinary center to study disabilities became obvious to a group of faculty from across campus who had until then only met informally over lunches to share their research. The Academic Plan’s emphases on areas of historic strength and interdisciplinary research and the arrival of Wilkinson and law school dean Hannah Arterian encouraged the group to formalize their relationship. “Syracuse has such a rich history in this area,” Arterian says. “What makes this collaboration so exciting is the quality of the pieces.”

Education professor Steven Taylor and law pro-

fessor Arlene Kanter—both known internationally for their work in disabilities—will co-direct the new center, assisted by a faculty executive committee consisting of professors Douglas Biklen and Beth Ferri, education; Robert Bogden, sociology; Nancy Mudrick, social work; and Michael Schwartz, law. “The center has enormous potential to change how we think about people with disabilities,” Kanter says. “We can no longer view people with disabilities as in need of a ‘cure’ or ‘treatment,’ or as people who need to be ‘fixed.’ Instead, we must ‘fix’ society to accept and respect the individuality, abilities, and dignity of people with disabilities.”

The center will provide a home to several new academic degree and certificate programs springing up across campus, including the country’s only three-year joint J.D. and master’s degree program in disability studies and a joint three-year J.D./M.S.W. program. It will sponsor programs, speaker series, conferences, and law reform efforts. The center and its staff will advocate on behalf of children and adults with disabilities who are as close as campus and as far away as Turkey, and will prepare legal briefs for precedent-setting cases. “The legal aspect of this collaboration is important,” says Taylor, who serves as the director of the Center on Human Policy. “We’ve worked with clubs and organizations in the community before, but the ability to collaborate with the College of Law and its public interest law clinic will enable us to have much more of an impact. We’ll be able to bring in more speakers and sponsor more events. Our visibility on and off campus will definitely increase.”

—Margaret Costello