

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Lake Union Herald

Lake Union Herald

9-2023

Learning at a Deeper Level

Naissa N'diaye

Maci Chen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs>



Learning at a Deeper Level

During the 2022–2023 school year, the Andrews University International Center for Trauma Education & Care placed two Andrews students at the Bourj Hammoud Adventist Learning Center (ALC) in Beirut, Lebanon, to work with Syrian refugee children.

Naissa N'diaye and Maci Chen created a trauma-informed care culture at the school; provided a safe space for students and teachers to express their needs and concerns; taught coping skills, behavioral management and classroom strategies; and gave space for all involved to tell their stories.

At the same time, Naissa and Maci were hugely impacted, not only because they had opportunity to practice what they learned in school but because the ALC staff, students and families enriched Naissa's and Maci's worldviews—highlighting what is really important in life and showing the true meaning of unconditional love.

My name is Naissa N'diaye.

I was born in Ivory Coast, but my family is from various parts of West Africa. When I was 7 years old, my parents moved, and I grew up in different parts of West Africa, Central Africa and East Africa. Moving so much as a child opened my mind to the beauty of the world and the nuances of cultures and individuals.

After graduating from high school in Kenya, I started working for an NGO, thinking that I wanted to work in the field of international development. I learned that the scope of human suffering was far greater than I could wrap my head around, and I longed to be with people instead of behind a desk looking at numbers. Although the work was essential and necessary, I wanted more, so I decided to study social work. After prayers and research, I ended up at Middle East University (MEU) in Lebanon. There, I was able to be involved in service projects for refugees. The work was rewarding, and the people I met were genuine and kind. I knew social work was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. God was in those spaces, and I wanted to be working with Him as His hands and feet. During that first year, I learned about the Adventist Learning Center (ALC) and the amazing work that has been done in providing education for children.

I left for Andrews in the fall of 2017 and started my journey to become a social worker. I loved everything I learned and saw how it changed people's lives in a tangible way. I met a lot of great, God-fearing people who

inspired me to not be afraid to do unconventional things. I learned to trust the route that God had for me and decided to spend a year in Mauritania, serving with ADRA. My time there, although cut short by the pandemic, furthered my love for God and His mission. I came back to Andrews in 2020, continued my undergraduate degree and proceeded to do my master's. Every now and then, my heart returned to my time in Lebanon, and as I neared the end of my graduate program, I knew God was leading me there.

From the moment we arrived in Lebanon, Maci and I knew we were right where we were supposed to be. Not everything was easy, but there was a continuous peace over me, regardless of the circumstances that arose. My work at ALC involved doing counseling with children and their families and working alongside teachers to implement trauma-informed strategies. There were crises on different scales that we had to navigate, but our main work was to be a safe space for the children and

▼ Naissa N'diaye felt called to work at the Adventist Learning Center (ALC) providing education for children.



► Naïssa N'diaye enjoyed time outdoors with some of the fourth graders during their lunch/free time.



Maci Chen

staff of ALC. I believe we were able to create an environment of trust that allowed many people to safely share their hearts, experiences and stories. Although the journey of healing is long, I believe we were able to help them either to begin that journey or continue deeper in it.

One of the most impactful moments from the experience showed me how the power of presence can impact someone's life. I remember meeting with a teacher and, after 30 minutes of telling me what was troubling her and crying, she said, "You are the best thing that has happened to me and this school this year." My prayer every day going to ALC

was to let God's presence do the work through me. This experience, and many others like these, taught me that as long as we have God on our side, there is nothing so big that He can't solve it. As humans, it is our role to walk alongside people who are broken-hearted and give them hope so that they can see the hand of God in their lives. My hope for the future is to continue working with refugee populations, no matter how near or far. Although I would love to continue working in Lebanon, I desire above all to be where God wants me to be and for His presence to move in those spaces.

My name is Maci Chen.

I grew up in Berrien Springs before my family moved out to sunny California, so I consider Andrews my home away from home. I began studying social work my freshman year at La Sierra University and knew that it was a good field for me because I truly enjoyed all of my classes and loved the versatility and diversity within the field. My sophomore year of college, I returned to Berrien Springs to attend Andrews, and I am finally graduating with my master's in social work. I have truly appreciated the spiritual life on the Andrews campus and connecting with the students, faculty and staff who make the University what it is.

In 2022, my fellow social work student and friend, Naïssa, convinced me to move across the ocean with her to work at the Adventist Learning Center (ALC) for my master's internship. Personally,

I love learning about new cultures and everything they have to offer, and I think the best way to do that is to be fully immersed. Recognizing the amazing opportunity this would be, I agreed, and we set off together at the end of August.

Working at ALC was a totally new and growing experience. We dealt with a lot of difficult situations, but we also got to work with some of the most resilient people I've ever met—individuals, including children, who were subject to daily abuse; who struggled with access to clean water, electricity, education, food and medical services; who experienced ever-present discrimination; and whose wages don't meet living expenses. Despite these circumstances, I heard these children and parents laugh the loudest, pour out words of encouragement, find joy in the little things and have hope in the future in powerful ways.



Photo courtesy Maci Chen

▲ Maci Chen (second from left) ran a psychoeducation/support group for some of the Kurdish ALC mothers.



Hala

As the first social workers at this learning center, we had a lot of opportunities to create and design interventions that met specific needs we saw. Our work, guided by our on-site supervisor, included a weekly Nurture Group for 7th and 8th grade students, morning classroom worships, after-school homework help for students, Learning Disability Center appointments and resources, in-home visitations, one-on-one counseling and family sessions, parent support/psychoeducation groups, classroom check-ins, individual meetings and in-class support for teachers, and social work moments in staff meetings and trainings.

There were so many things that touched me personally and ways that I saw God through these individuals. One instance in particular stands out to me. Naissa and I were doing a home visit with a family who had six children, two of whom went to ALC. On this particular day, there was a lot of tension in the household, and we were there as a supportive and calming presence. We had arrived in the afternoon and had stayed into their lunchtime, so they cooked a meal for everyone while we were there. They brought out a bag of bread and one big round tray of a potato and vegetable dish for all of them to share. Then they brought us separate plates full of food and our own huge pieces of bread. It was such

a generous amount compared to what they were all sharing together. As we kept on talking, I realized they had just fed us with the last of what they would have eaten for their next meal. I was astounded and shocked, immediately reminded of the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. This story, which incredibly took place an hour from where this family lives, displays overwhelming generous hospitality and unwavering faith—attributes that I experienced from this family in a truly tangible way. I couldn't believe that they had given us what little they had without mention or hesitation. They, and so many others, truly showed me what God's heart looks like. Through their selflessness, I learned at a much deeper level what true faith and generosity look like.

These moments, and many other instances, had a profound impact on me as I saw God working through ALC and its impact on the students and families there. One of my biggest hopes in working with each person was that, despite our differences, they were able to tangibly feel and understand God's love to the same degree that they shared it, knowingly or unknowingly, with us.

Naissa N'diaye and **Maci Chen** both completed a Master of Social Work at the Andrews University School of Social Work.

▲ **Maci Chen** (right) participated in a morning worship where the sixth graders created letters to themselves using words describing who God says they are.