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Giving Goes Beyond the Giver and Receiver

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The anticipation of AGPA Connect 2024 is brewing. In December, the Group Foundation's Scholarship Committee reviewed many applications. The new year is a good time to check in with past scholarship recipients

and see how they are doing. We followed up with seven colleagues, who received scholarships from 2008 to 2023 and who are now social workers, psychiatrists, psychiatric residents, and psychology associates, living in various places in the United States. Six of the previous recipients have given permission to use their names, and one remains anonymous.

We realize this is a small sampling of people who have received scholarships over the years. There is a wealth of information to be gathered from past recipients if time permitted. Many past scholarship recipients are long-standing AGPA members who have continued their professional journey with us, while others interacted with us just the one time or for only a short term—just like group members. How do some become abiding members? It is important to note irrespective of the length of time past recipients have been involved with AGPA, we know from the thank you letters the Foundation received that most people's experience at AGPA Connect is powerful and often transformative for them personally and professionally. Most notably, absorption of group work knowledge is immense. It bears repeating to note that one of the main focuses of the Group Foundation is to promote the education of group work. Our intention with this *Group Assets* article, is that both non-donors and donors of the Group Foundation will be informed of the remarkable value of the Scholarship Program. If as a donor you had any doubts about your gift, I hope those doubts will fade as you read on and see that your gifts are far-reaching and are appreciated.

I posed several questions to past scholarship recipients, including: Thinking about the scholarship you initially received from the Group Foundation, what were your reasons for applying? After receiving the scholarship and attending AGPA Connect, what did you take away from the experience? How did you utilize the experience initially in your work? What opportunities were opened for you professionally by attending AGPA Connect? Is there anything else you would want the reader to know about yourself, your career path, and the benefits of the scholarship? We will hear from Helen Chao, LCSW; Greg Greer, LAC, MSW, CGP; Zachary Michel MD; Thanh Phan, MD; Beverlin Rosario-Williams, MA; and Francois Williams, MD.

There are themes that developed from the respondents. They all had a supervisor, mentor, colleague, or teacher who told them about AGPA and the Group Foundation Scholarship Program before they applied. Dr. Francois Williams was a third-year psychiatry resident at Baylor and attended a 12-week course on group psychotherapy. His teacher, Jennifer Markey, PhD, sparked his interest in group work. She also encouraged him to attend AGPA to expand his network and connect with others. He was accepted into a child and adolescent psychiatry fellowship at Georgetown two months before attending AGPA Connect. He took advantage of all workshops around integrating groups within school settings. This opened doors for him to be in consultation with Tony Sheppard, PsyD, ABPP, CGP, AGPA-F, Seth Aronson, PsyD, CGP, AGPA-F, and Andrew Pojman, EdD, CGP, AGPA-F. Ms. Chao was attending a group psychotherapy course, and her adjunct professor, Kurt White, LICSW, CGP, AGPA-F, strongly encouraged her and all his students to apply for scholarships. Mr. Greer had a similar experience while attending graduate school; as his adjunct professor, I intro-

duced him and my entire class to AGPA and the Foundation's scholarship opportunities. Mr. Greer states: "I was a non-traditional student at 39 years old, with no income and surviving on student loans. The scholarship granted me an opportunity to explore AGPA that led to what I now consider my professional home." Our anonymous responder stated, "After hearing from colleagues and being in the middle of a pandemic, they realized virtually would certainly make it possible to attend. Ms. Rosario-Williams applied to attend while working at the Children's Assessment Center with survivors of sexual abuse: "The group therapy experience was new, and I had no prior training in group dynamics. I applied for the scholarship to attend to better understand intergenerational trauma and use group therapy to build community and facilitate healing."

AGPA Connect's two-day Institute was one of the most powerful experiences scholarship recipients encountered. "My Institute experience demonstrated to me in a deeply personal, first-hand way that the group process is transformative," said Dr. Michel. Dr. Phan said about the Institute: "What I did appreciate was taking the role of a group member during the two-day Institute. "It was humbling. Delving into my personal life experience and picking apart how it is influencing the work that I do post-AGPA has been scary. It did make me feel a need to reexamine 'self' and find ways to repurpose this vehicle of existence." "My first experience with the two-day Institute inspired intimacy with group processing beyond my wildest emotional capacities. It was vulnerably, terrifying, and motivating simultaneously to learn group interventions and approaches while emoting," said Mr. Greer. The Institute Ms. Rosario-Williams attended helped her provide a new framework for the work she was doing at her agency. The new knowledge empowered her to provide meaningful psychoeducation to individuals and groups.

The above personal learning experiences remind me of two quotes. The first was from the late Pearl Rosenberg, PhD, an active member of AGPA. Pearl stated: "The study of the group therapist as a person is of central importance because group therapy is based on the reactions and the relationships of the group members with one another." Peter Cole, LCSW, CGP, and Daisy Reese, LCSW, CGP, co-authors of *New Directions in Gestalt Group Therapy* (Routledge, 2018) state it this way, "The capacity for relational living lies at the heart of human growth and development. For nowhere is there a more powerful place to explore our relationality than in groups."

Other common themes expressed by past scholarship recipients were meeting others doing similar work; networking; exchanging ideas; being warmly welcomed by people at AGPA Connect; witnessing the power of group work in their Institutes and workshops; and being professionally challenged and taking on the challenges. Ms. Rosario-Williams sums it up perfectly: "Networking with clinicians invested in my professional growth and using the skills I learned at AGPA Connect to facilitate healing among the populations I serve has been an empowering experience that I cherish dearly."

The opportunities that opened after receiving Foundation scholarships and attending AGPA Connect are inspiring to hear. It further makes the work of the Group Foundation

meaningful and powerful. We know the power of group and how it changes lives. The recipients took the risk of applying for a scholarship and put themselves out there regarding their desires. Even if you are not in a position in your career to be involved with students, new professionals, or agency employees, please find ways to introduce the Scholarship Program. It is crucial for all of us to introduce AGPA to those who do not know us and can benefit from further training. Many members and leaders have come to AGPA through the Foundation's Scholarship Program. I challenge everyone to introduce at least one person to AGPA and assist them in applying for a scholarship through the Group Foundation for Advancing Mental Health.

When asked "what opportunities were opened up for you professionally by attending AGPA Connect?," Dr. Francois Williams said:

"Participating in AGPA Connect has been pivotal in my professional journey. It opened doors to building meaningful connections with prominent figures in the field, like Maryetta Andrews-Sachs, MA, LICSW, CGP, AGPA-F; David Flohr, PhD, CGP; Seamus Bhatt-Mackin, MD, CGP, AGPA-F; and Farooq Mohyuddin, MD, CGP, AGPA-F. These leaders, now my mentors, have significantly influenced my approach within the Mid-Atlantic Group Psychotherapy Society community. Furthermore, the conference inspired me to initiate several parenting groups at Georgetown University Hospital, leveraging the insights and techniques I acquired at AGPA Connect. Most notably, it instilled in me the confidence to establish my private practice, with group psychotherapy as its cornerstone. Since attending AGPA Connect, I have had the opportunity to exercise leadership through my participation as one of the Co-Chairs of the AGPA Private Practice Special Interest Group and as Co-Chair of the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society's Seminar Series. AGPA Connect has not only expanded my professional network but also enriched my clinical skills and entrepreneurial spirit in the field of psychiatry."

Ms. Chao states it this way: "I truly believe the skills I learned from AGPA Connect transformed the way I co-facilitate groups and even the way I work in individual therapy. Because of the scholarship, I also have a very strong relationship with AGPA and now benefit from ongoing mentorship with someone in AGPA leadership. I am also on the Board of the Group Foundation, even though I am so young in my career. How mind boggling is that!"

Over the years, Mr. Greer has become involved in AGPA's Membership Committee, is Co-Chair of the Addiction and Recovery SIG, helped when AGPA came to his local Affiliate, and became a Certified Group Psychotherapist (CGP).

Drs. Phan and Michel took away from their AGPA Connect experience that they wanted to do group therapy. Each returned to their residency program and started a new group. Dr. Michel relayed that AGPA Connect provided him with key ingredients to get started and the confidence that, with effort and guidance the group would fledge. "Running the group has been a highlight of my medical education," he said.

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GIVING GOES BEYOND THE GIVER AND RECEIVER
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Dr. Phan spoke about AGPA Connect energizing her. With support from her program, faculty, and therapy supervisor/co-leader, she was able to form a process group for people dealing with debilitating medical illness. She relayed that as a resident on a hospital floor where there were many patients who expressed loneliness, helplessness, and the sense of being a burden to their loved ones, it made sense to her to bring those people together in a common space. She had always wanted to know how illness impacts us and whether we can find answers to those existential questions spurred on by severe physical and mental suffering.

The pleasure has been all mine to write this article and gain intimate knowledge of the impact scholarships have made on people’s lives and careers. I want to thank the Foundation’s contributors and former scholarship recipients who made the article possible. Mentorship is profoundly important. The Group Foundation Board is delighted to be able to provide opportunities for promoting group work and the further training of this much needed therapy for our world and its inhabitants. I will close and leave you with one of the best statements, in my opinion, about group therapy expressed by J. Scott Rutan, PhD, AGPA-DF, and Walter Stone, MD, AGPA-DLF.

“Group therapy seems to be a natural antidote to the predominant disorder of our age. Since groups focus on individuals as relational beings and rely on relationships for growth, learning and change, this treatment offers a response to modern mankind’s fragmented ability to relate. Groups offer the hope of relatedness in the context of appropriate limits, and opportunity to gain autonomy through intimacy, not at the expense of intimacy.”

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