

CLA *SPRING* UPDATE

College of Liberal Arts

EXPLORE/ENGAGE/ENRICH/EARN

Spring 2022

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TO THEIR RESCUE

CLA alumna devotes her life to
combatting human trafficking



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CLA NEWS



FALL LINEUP

Sense & Sensibility and *Peter and the Starcatcher* highlight the fall theatrical schedule, while *Cabaret* hits the Tucker Theatre stage next spring. Find information about more than 200 MTSU Arts events at mtsu.edu/mtsuaarts.

Welcome to the CLA Spring Update!

We did not want to wait for the next edition of *CLA Magazine* to share just a portion of the exciting happenings in the College of Liberal Arts. I am so proud of the work of our faculty, staff, students, and alumni. Each day, I find evidence of the life-changing impact of a liberal arts education. In CLA, we are in the business of changing lives.

I recently asked a prospective student, "How do you plan to change the world?" I could tell that the question stunned them as they scrambled to find a response. I then reminded them that the world starts where we are, in the sphere we operate in every day. The things we do in that sphere have an impact, resulting in the ever-widening circumference of that sphere. Changing the world can mean influencing the trajectory of your family, serving those in your community, contributing solutions to social problems, and demonstrating civic responsibility. Changing the world begins with developing the skills that make the world better because the world begins with you.

In this spring update, you will read stories that highlight the ways a liberal arts education prepares you to change the world, whatever your future holds. You will read about our alumna Gabrielle Thompson's work to end human trafficking and about how to "Be the Missing Piece" of the puzzle to initiate the change we need to see in the world.

I am confident that you will enjoy the stories contained in this publication. Allow them to help you reflect on the impact you have on the world around you. Thank you for joining us in our mission to change lives. ■

Leah Tolbert Lyons

Dean, College of Liberal Arts, Leah.Lyons@mtsu.edu

TRUE BLUE NEWS ANY TIME MTSUNEWS.COM



DAILY DOUBLE

School of Music graduate student Christine Whelchel, after recent treatment for breast cancer, dominated on *Jeopardy!* with \$75,000 in winnings and is studying abroad in Vienna this summer with associate professor Joseph Morgan.

mtsunews.com/jeopardy-champ-music-graduate-student/



HUMANITIES PATHWAY

The Siegel Humanities Academy, a collaboration between CLA and Siegel High School, celebrated its first semester of educating students about the liberal arts and connecting them to college and career opportunities.

mtsunews.com/siegel-humanities-academy-april2022/



TO THEIR RESCUE

Gabrielle Thompson devotes her life
to preventing human trafficking and
restoring freedom to traumatized victims

Story by Allison Gorman and illustration by Tim Shawl

Gabrielle Thompson says everyone she knows who works to fight trafficking can describe their own life-changing moment. For her, the moment came in 2015, inside a building on the 30-block stretch that makes up Delhi's infamous red-light district. Flanked by a protective detail of local men, she made her way past the first-floor retail space to the second and third floors, where the women could reach through barred windows to wave scarves at potential buyers outside.

"One woman was doing that, and she looked at me and I looked at her—we made eye contact—and she was probably my age. There was something about that moment where I . . ." Thompson's voice trailed off. She'll allude to the moment, but she doesn't often talk about it. "There's no answer as to why it's her and not me. We're equals. She's my age, she's a woman. And here she is, living in a brothel, all because of life situations that were completely out of her control."

Thompson was 25, a year out of her master's program in International Affairs at MTSU and the new CEO and executive director of Nashville-based nonprofit Free for Life International, which combats human trafficking and helps survivors. What Thompson witnessed in that Indian brothel only hinted at the horrors to which the woman in the window, and countless others like her, were subjected.

"That day we partnered with an organization that specialized in raids," Thompson said. "They showed us GoPro footage from the raids they had done in that brothel district. Women hidden in the walls, under the floorboards, in cages. That day changed my life."

Woman on a Mission

Hers was a moment of confirmation: "I just thought, 'These are my sisters, and I want to serve them.'"

She'd had that conviction since she was a teenager. Growing up with artist parents in Los Angeles and then Franklin, Tennessee, she was fascinated by *National Geographic* and similar photographic books that filled their home, especially by the photos of girls in other countries. She recalls wondering what their lives were like—and her dawning realization that their access to basic freedoms and opportunity depended entirely on where they happened to live. By age 15, she'd settled on her life's mission.



“The one thing I knew was that I wanted to serve women and girls internationally, but I had never met anyone doing that,” said Thompson, the 2021–22 MTSU Young Alumni Achievement Award honoree. “So when I got to MTSU, I knew what I wanted to do but had no idea how to do it. That’s when I found the Global Studies [program].”

“There’s a particular kind of student who picks our degree,” said Jim Chaney, assistant professor of Global Studies and Human Geography. “. . . Students that are attracted to the College of Liberal Arts and Global Studies, I like to think they have something a little bit different. They want something better for humanity, and they want to make a difference.”

Chaney was that student too. After earning a graduate certificate at MTSU and before completing his doctorate, he did nonprofit work in post-Katrina New Orleans, helping the undocumented population, who were easy targets of labor traffickers.

These are my sisters, and I want to serve them.

When Chaney and Thompson met, in 2014, he had just joined MTSU’s faculty as an instructor. She had her bachelor’s in Global Studies and was a master’s student, focused on empowering women through education and economic opportunity. He remembers having the “make a difference” conversation with her informally, then losing touch when she graduated and moved to Costa Rica, where she worked for a nonprofit providing microloans to impoverished female entrepreneurs. A year later, Thompson was back in touch, telling Chaney about her new job.

“She told me she’d found something that was a major problem, that broke her heart, but at the same time she thought she could do something about it and make a difference,” he said. “That’s what makes her tick.”

Filling the Gaps

Free for Life was founded in 2006 by Colette Wise. Her focus was primarily sex trafficking. It was intense, ground-level work—rescuing enslaved women in India and Nepal, and running a safe house for survivors in Thailand, in partnership with local anti-trafficking groups.

By 2013, Wise was ready to entrust Free for Life to a new executive director. Two years later she was still looking for the right person for the job. Then Gabrielle Thompson applied.



When Thompson walked in for the interview, Wise stood up. “You’re the one,” she said.

Thompson had initially hesitated to apply. But once she took the reins, she charted a new, ambitious course for Free for Life to combat human trafficking in a more robust, holistic way.

She expanded its international reach to such countries as Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru, concentrating on where the need was greatest. She overhauled existing programs and developed new ones based on her research at MTSU, where she had studied “the push-pull factors that lead to female-focused oppression” and how to scale up grassroots-level action to create generational change.

“I was able to use the sustainable tools of development that I had learned and implemented and worked on for such a long time into the programs and the story of Free for Life International and the survivors that we serve,” Thompson said.

Because there are many domestic and international organizations involved in anti-trafficking work, particularly sex trafficking, her goal was to fill the

gaps in service. She created tiered programming to cover what she calls “the story of trafficking”:

- **rescue**, through transit-monitoring stations
- **rehabilitation**, through entities like safe houses, where residents can stay as long as they need
- **restoration** of survivors

For that last piece, Thompson created a new domestic program—the only one of its kind in the U.S.—that offers scholarships and one-on-one mentoring for trafficking survivors, with no time limit for degree completion. Since the program was established four years ago, survivors have learned a variety of trades and disciplines, from welding to theology to biomedical engineering.

Changing the Calculation

Another direct-service program Thompson added covers the alternate story of trafficking—that is, trafficking that doesn’t happen.

Chaney, who has served on various Free for Life committees since 2017 and on its board since 2019, notes that the journey from rescue to restoration is long and expensive.



Education and awareness program in Nepal

I see those pieces that are
hard to even talk about,
but I also get to see those
pieces that give me fire.



Photo by J. Intintoli

“They say it takes five years for the trauma of trafficking to wear off to where people can actually operate normally,” he said.

Free for Life has rescued 2,449 individuals so far, and it commits to walking that long journey with each one. But that’s not the best way to effect broad change.

“Once a victim has been in trafficking, it’s a lot harder to fix the damage,” Chaney said. “Prevention is the key.”

To that end, Thompson and her team developed training for domestic and international organizations that work with communities at risk of exploitation—children in orphanages and foster care, refugees and immigrants, runaways and homeless youth—so they recognize red flags.

Chaney says it is important to realize that most trafficking victims are not snatched off the street but groomed by someone who earns their trust over time.

A fluent Spanish speaker, Chaney has traveled with Thompson to Latin America to conduct trainings. She and her team travel constantly, but the pandemic required recalibrating the prevention program. So Thompson took the prevention training virtual, expanding its reach in the U.S. and abroad, while also making an aggressive push for prevention training in Nashville. Internationally, she shifted Free for Life’s resources from rescue efforts to COVID-19 relief, so daily wage earners would be less susceptible to exploitation. Women and girls at the safehouse were given computers to study online.

Undeterred

If Colette Wise needed verification that Gabrielle Thompson was “the one,” the continued efficacy and growth of Free for Life, even during a pandemic, has provided it.

“Gabrielle took a fledgling organization focused mainly in South and Southeast Asia—the scholarship program wasn’t up and running, the prevention program wasn’t up and running—and opened it up to different areas,” Chaney said.

Despite COVID-19, Thompson managed to open another transit-monitoring station in India. This one is primarily focused on rescuing boys from labor trafficking, another global scourge. There are seven types of human trafficking that together affect 40 million people worldwide, but Thompson estimates that 90% of resources go to sex trafficking. Free for Life currently serves labor trafficking survivors in two programs, and Thompson’s goal is to broaden its scope.

She seems undeterred by the enormity of the problem or the devastating nature of the work, which takes her to “the darkest spaces of our world.”

“It’s full circle though,” Thompson said. “I see those pieces that are hard to even talk about, but I also get to see those pieces that give me fire, which is when survivors start healing, when they feel empowered, when they start making decisions for themselves, when they feel loved, when they have joy. All of that is completely worth it.” ■



How to Help

Given the challenges involved in global anti-trafficking work—safety concerns, logistical issues, language barriers, emotional exhaustion—fundraising would seem like a cakewalk. But Gabrielle Thompson says it’s one of the toughest parts of her job.

“Nobody likes it,” she says. “That’s the part that’s a challenge within a nonprofit—but it’s a necessary piece. . . . The only way that we are alive and sustainable is through people’s generosity.”

To donate to Free for Life International, read its success stories, and learn about sustainable giving through its Compassion Collective, visit freeforlifeintl.org.



A Winning Combination

Arts and sciences work hand in hand to shape a better future

By Lucy Langworthy, Assistant to the Dean

As educators, we embrace the calling to help our students prepare for life after college, both personally and professionally. But many would have us think that this is an impossible task in the talent crisis of the post-COVID-19 world. We, however, do not see a crisis on our campus, but an opportunity. It comes in the shape of the MTSU student who acquires both hard and soft skills from the arts and sciences while in college.

Why is this an answer to the ailing talent pool? Infosys President Ravi Kumar says it like this:

“Liberal arts graduates bring a depth and breadth of knowledge from across the humanities and social sciences that complement the hard skills of engineers and data scientists. And in a world that increasingly interacts with technology in every facet of daily life, it’s increasingly important that technology reflects the world around us,” Kumar wrote in a CNBC.com piece titled “The liberal arts degree is alive and well—and critically important to the future of tech.”

And, even more importantly, liberal arts grads “are trained in how to learn,” he adds.

The problem lies in the fact that students do not always know how to articulate and apply these skills.

So, in 2018, funded by a grant from MT Engage, the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) and College of

Basic and Applied Sciences (CBAS) at MTSU began a mission together to help students understand and express the richness that the arts and sciences teach. The two colleges organized a majors fair where faculty from both CLA and CBAS were available to talk with students about the skills their programs provided and the cocurricular activities and internships that complemented them.

Another event was added in 2019 for faculty to hear from colleagues in these two colleges who were actively teaching these essential skills of problem-solving, creativity, teamwork, empathy, and cognitive flexibility in their classes. Additionally, human resource professionals from middle Tennessee were invited to campus to talk to students about the kinds of skills they seek.

The following year, CLA and CBAS articulated these skills in a more concrete way: Art Education students designed portable wooden murals that represented the top 10 skills employers were seeking in 2020. Students from all majors were then invited to come paint the murals outdoors in this “Be the Missing Piece” project and learn about these skills that they would need after graduation. With support of MT Engage funds, the Arts and Sciences Collaborative added four more murals in a spring 2022 pop-up painting event, highlighting new skills from the World Economic Forum’s 2025 *Future of Jobs Report*.

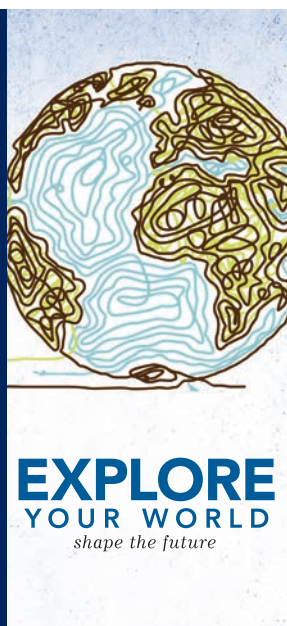


Another outdoor activity in 2021 addressed a problem presented by the pandemic. A student double-majoring in Spanish and Biology proposed the project to show students how to grow sprouts to add nutrition to their diet when fresh vegetables are not as readily available.

These projects show that students in these two colleges are learning how to be not only problem-solvers, but also problem-framers.

These kinds of collaborations also mirror what students encounter in the workplace, working with those whose skills are very different from their own but whose perspective makes their work all the richer, making them better able to serve the world they enter after college. ■





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