In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, no one would have faulted Columbia social work students Sofia An, a Kazakhstani native, and Oyut-Erdene Namdaldagva, a native of Mongolia, if they felt even further from their respective homes.

However, the two women, who graduate from the School of Social Work today, felt an even stronger bond with the United States at the time and sensed the tragic events had unified disparate peoples around the globe. “I feel that we live in one world,” said An. “I’m from a Muslim country, yet even I think borders between countries are artificial. We’re all part of the same world in which everything is interconnected.”

“After September 11, I saw the unity of humanity,” added Namdaldagva. “I added a solidarity and a unity with people who want peace. America’s patriotism was amazing to me after the attacks. I felt a part of it simply because New York is my temporary home.”

Both women are first-generation students from their respective homes. An and Namdaldagva are two of the six Columbia students to graduate as fellows of the Open Society Institute’s Social Work Fellowship Program. The others are Lina Andrevs, of Kyrgyzstan, Leyla Ismailova, of Azerbaijan, Andrei Nagorny, of Uzbekistan, and La Shekladze, of Georgia.

Sponsored by the Soros Foundation, the Soros Scholars program is designed to provide training in social work to implement reform, create policy, and foster the development of social work in the participating countries. The participating countries are Afghanistan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Upon the conclusion of the fellowship, fellows return home to apply their new knowledge in practice.

Eight other fellows have just completed their first year at the School of Social Work. They will be joined by another eight in the 2002-2003 academic year.

An and Namdaldagva found their two years at Columbia and practicing field work in New York City to be tremendously beneficial.

“This was a rare opportunity to study this field because in Kazakhstan we don’t have social work education,” said An, a medical doctor in her home country. “In New York, we had a diversity of experiences, working with different people—both social workers and clients. Now we see differences in those we serve and can apply our knowledge of social work in any setting.”

“There is a discrepancy in living situations and socioeconomic status between here and Mongolia,” added Namdaldagva. “But helping people across nations is a process—there are common concepts and tendencies.”

Both women plan to conduct much of their work in the area of gerontology. An intends to work for one of the international organizations that implement social programs in Kazakhstan while Namdaldagva will head a newly created master’s program at the Mongolian State Pedagogical University in Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian capital.

—James Devitt

Graduate to Continue Research on Understanding DiGeorge Syndrome

As a teenager, Loydie Jerome-Majewska wanted to be a doctor. But after volunteering in the emergency room of a hospital in Queens during her senior year in high school, she quickly learned that she couldn’t stand the sight of blood... She eventually set her sights on laboratory work and completed her Ph.D. with distinction in December in the Integrated Program in Cellular, Molecular and Biophysical Studies at Columbia’s Health Sciences Campus.

While Jerome-Majewska’s aversion to the sight of blood did not cease, she remains dedicated to addressing an affliction that complicates the distribution of blood throughout the body. Her research focused on the function of a transcription factor gene, Tbx1, as the key gene in DiGeorge Syndrome, an affliction that results from abnormal development of the face, thymus and parathyroid glands, and heart. DiGeorge Syndrome, the second most common cause of congenital heart defects after Down Syndrome, affects 1 in 3,000 to 4,000 children born each year.

“When Loydie joined the laboratory, this obscure gene had been recently discovered and was known to be a candidate for involvement in DiGeorge Syndrome,” said Virginia Papaioannou, a professor of genetics and development, who supervised Jerome-Majewska’s dissertation. “However, 20 or 30 other genes were also candidates, and Tbx1 was not the current favorite. During the course of her studies, Loydie characterized the Tbx1 gene in Jocas, compared the mouse gene with the human, and produced an overexpression in the mouse gene using gene targeting technology. Her work established this gene as the key gene in the DiGeorge Syndrome and had a profound impact on research on this human disorder.”

Currently a post-doctoral fellow at Columbia’s College of Physicians & Surgeons, Jerome-Majewska will continue her research on DiGeorge Syndrome. The Tbx1 gene accounts for 90 percent of the affliction’s occurrence, and her work will focus on other factors that contribute to its existence.

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Jerome-Majewska, who supervised Jerome-Majewska’s research at Rockefeller University, and they have a two-year-old son.

—James Devitt

Portraits of the Graduates

RARELY IS A FATHER ABLE TO ATTEND HIS SON OR DAUGHTER’S COLLEGE GRADUATION CEREMONY IN A CAP AND GOWN OF HIS OWN. SUCH IS THE CASE FOR ANSELL BARRETT, 45, MANAGER OF BUDGET OPERATIONS FOR COLUMBIA’S UNIVERSITY RESIDENCE HALLS (URH), WHO WILL RECEIVE HIS EXECUTIVE MASTERS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (EMPA) FROM THE SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND WILL ALSO HAVE THE HONOR OF SEEING HIS DAUGHTER CLAUDIA, 22, GRADUATE WITH A MAJOR IN PSYCHOLOGY FROM COLUMBIA COLLEGE ON THE SAME DAY.

Ansell, who has worked at Columbia since July of 1998, says helping his daughter assimilate not only on campus but in a city he has called home for the past 15 years, has been rewarding. Born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, Claudia had to adjust to life in New York, and Ansell wasn’t always sure about attending Columbia after also having been accepted at Emory and Vassar. But she decided, “New York City had much more to offer than Atlanta or Poughkeepsie.” Claudia also wanted to be close to her father.

“Most students can only call home when they are home-sick,” says Claudia. Having her father a short distance from her dorm made her feel like she had the comforts of home right on campus.

The two have always been close, and meeting for lunch in Ansell’s campus office, to communicate the joys and frustrations of their Columbia experience, allowed this father and daughter to share more educational challenges than most.

Claudia and her father have even proofread each other’s papers and brainstormed together for up-coming projects.

“Being at SIPA, I understood pressure and could relate not only as a parent but as a student as well,” said Claudia.

“One time Claudia helped me work my way through a difficult calculus equation,” says Ansell. “She has the math ability and her dad was a great help during her Contemporary Civilization core course. “My father is very knowledgeable about W.E.B. DuBois,” says Claudia.

When it comes to future plans, Claudia, who concentrated in pre med, hopes to take her MCATs next year after taking some time off to work in the medical field assisting a dermatologist in the city.

As for Ansell, “My short term objective is to apply the skills I have learned at SIPA here at Columbia.” He studied public administration out of a desire to continue in academia, non-prof for prof it or government.

Being a father, student and full time employee was a challenge. “I had a very supportive superior,” says Ansell. “Ross Fraser really encouraged me to pursue my MPA.” In addition to Fraser, other colleagues were also helpful.

So, how does the graduating father feel? “I am happy for both of us.” Ansell and Claudia will be taking a trip to Kingston and the North Coast of Jamaica to celebrate their accomplishments.

The two have a combined eight graduation tickets for the entire family, half of whom will be flying in from Jamaica just to see father and daughter graduate on Low Plaza on May 22.