

## Alumni Spotlight: M. Lori Thomas, Ph. D.



M. Lori Thomas is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at UNC Charlotte. She completed her Ph.D. in Social Work at VCU in 2008. Her scholarship interests include organization and community practice in homelessness, particularly homelessness among older adults and those experiencing serious mental illness or co-occurring disorders. Lori is also interested in the intersection of religion and social welfare, completing national collaborative research on best practices in faith-based human services and dissertation research on faith-based advocacy organizations. Lori has over 10 years of work experience in affordable housing and homeless services. Most

recently, she coordinated and directed the development of a permanent housing and comprehensive mental health program for homeless individuals in the Greater Richmond. Lori's community engagement activities are aligned with her research interests and practice experience.

In 2010, Lori was appointed to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Coalition for Housing by the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners. She serves the Coalition as the chair of the Research and Evaluation Committee. She is also leading the evaluation efforts of permanent supportive housing programs at Urban Ministry Center and McCreesh Place in Charlotte, North Carolina. As a teacher, Lori was awarded the 2010 CHHS Graduate Teaching Award. Lori has recently been named a 2011 Hartford Faculty Scholar. Funded by The John A. Hartford Foundation of New York City and administered by The Gerontological Society of America, the Geriatric Social Work Initiative cultivates faculty leaders in gerontological education and research through the Faculty Scholars Program in training academic leaders to teach, mentor, do cutting-edge research, and prepare the next generation of social workers to serve older adults.

**PFF Program:** What does the "Preparing Future Faculty Program" mean to you?

I immediately think of being introduced to aspects of academia that I was relatively naïve about! For example, I hadn't thought about distinguishing between the idealized version of the three-legged tenure stool (with the legs of teaching, research, and service being balanced) and the contextual realities of tenure (in some college and university settings one or two legs may be longer than the others challenging the notion of balance). I also remember the tools that I was given that I continue to draw from – teaching tips; grading tips; adult learning styles, philosophies, and frameworks.

**PFF Program:** How did your experiences in the PFF Program and receipt of the PFF Program Certificate of Achievement give you an 'edge' in your career?

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The first place the PFF program gave me an edge was on the job market. I had a teaching philosophy, a vetted CV, and a five year professional development plan before I went for campus visits because of my work in the PFF Program. In addition, I reviewed the notebook I had created from my PFF classes to compile a list of questions I wanted to ask in screening interviews at national conferences and at campus visits. The PFF classes and mentorship of an experienced faculty member helped me prepare for that process and gave me confidence. I have since called on my PFF materials to help me think about my own professional development. As I write my annual goals each year, I refer back to my PFF materials and notes. As I prepare syllabi, I draw from our discussions of rubrics and assignments and multiple learning styles to inform me. I actually keep my PFF materials in a file box in my office and use them when I have practical questions about research, teaching, or service. Also, you can't underestimate the added entry on your CV that indicates that you have invested time and energy in preparing yourself for a faculty role!

**PFF Program:** The capstone experience of the PFF Program is the internship/externship in which the student is mentored by a senior faculty member. Tell us a little bit about your internship/externship experience, and share with us the impact that the project and the mentoring relationship had on you.

I'm not sure if I can emphasize the importance of this component! I worked with Dr. Ellen Netting in the School of Social Work to teach a macro practice social work course. I had what seemed like a million questions through the process and she was available to answer them for me and put my experiences in context. This was invaluable. I can't imagine beginning to teach without this experience.

**PFF Program:** What is the most crucial piece of advice that you would give students currently enrolled in the PFF Program coursework?

Ask questions! Let the PFF faculty examine your teaching philosophy, your professional development plans, your CV – take advantage of the expertise around you!

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