Ask Dr. Moriah Thomason to talk about her work and she lights up like the colorful brain scans dotting her computer monitor. “I get passionate about what I do,” she says with a smile. “I can’t help it.”

Dr. Thomason joined Wayne State University from Stanford University in March as an assistant professor jointly appointed at MPSI and the Department of Pediatrics at the School of Medicine. She doesn’t like to waste time, so back in October, months before crossing the border into Michigan, she teamed with new WSU colleagues to submit a grant proposal to the NIH on neural and genetic contributions to pediatric anxiety disorder. “I wanted to hit the ground running,” she says. The proposal garnered positive feedback but fell just short of a fundable score. An undaunted Dr. Thomason shrugs her shoulders. “So we revise and re-submit. That’s how these things work.” It’s hard not to like an award-winning doctor of neuroscience, with an impeccable research track record at MIT, UCLA and Stanford, who refers to her new projects at WSU as “fun and scientifically worthwhile.” She describes complex cognitive research with the enthusiasm of a New World explorer, which is appropriate since many consider the brain the final frontier. Put simply, Dr. Thomason studies how children develop inside and out, the ties between social behavior and the brain’s chemistry, function and structure. How does the brain of a 13-year-old with anxiety disorder differ from the brain of 13-year-old who rarely feels anxious? Do changes in brain chemistry alter brain structure? Does altered brain structure predict emotional changes?

For more than a decade, she has collected brain scans of children, accumulating a priceless database of brain development over time. “Imaging technology continues to improve,” she explains, “so it’s important...
tic markers over time,” she explains. “One can map neural networks, determine normal in utero fetal imaging to study brain connectivity. The National Institute of Child Health and Development’s new projects is helping the researchers to scan the brains of infants, even at rest. Subjects do nothing, just relax. While functional MRI requires subjects for her resting state MRIs, a newer technology that literally makes something out of nothing. It allows researchers to see what is going on in the brain at rest. The brain is an amazing organ that has the potential to make a large difference in the lives of people.”

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have been found to have differences in brain structure and function. These differences can be observed using MRI. This technique allows researchers to see what is happening in the brain without having to make any invasive procedures. It is important to note that these differences are not the same for everyone with ASD. Some people may have more differences in certain areas of the brain while others might have fewer differences in other areas.

Neural and behavioral responses to stress and anxiety are important to me. They move the science forward more quickly. The legacy Dr. Thomson hopes to build is what makes a difference. I’m not there to criticize. I’m there to focus on what’s right and strengthen it.”

HUf’s program coordinator. “Calls to us have soared lately, because of our reputation for meaningful seminars on topics of importance to our audience. The information we provide makes a difference.”

Before creating a presentation, Bev pinpoints the organization’s purpose and strengths. “I respect these groups and the difficulties they face. I’m not there to criticize. I’m there to focus on what’s right and strengthen it.”

HUf trained 997 teachers, paraprofessionals, social workers, and classroom aides this year, more than double the 418 trained last year. Parent trainings have risen, too, and trainings to help grandparents raising grandchildren have doubled to 209. A popular topic is Recess Parenting, with ideas like Family Film Festival where members take turns picking the movie, choosing and preparing the snack, and leading a follow-on discussion. “Everyone gets to showcase their film,” Bev says. “We lead them forward in a way, and they lead the others, especially Detroit. Teamwork and dedication to my being successful, they move the science forward more quickly.”

The legacy Dr. Thomson hopes to build includes extensive mentoring of junior faculty, changing the way at-risk pregnancies are diagnosed and treated, significantly improving the lives of many people, and playing a pivotal role in the university. As a team in Arizona, she helped her colleagues build their successful Princeton Review franchise by visiting colleges across the state to procctor exams, her first introduction to the academic life. “I started working on university campuses early,” she says with a laugh, “and I doubt I will ever be leaving.”

Parents enjoy crafting as they learn the value of play. Free massages were provided at a stress reduction workshop.

“Even when the situation and the subject is serious, we make it interesting.”

Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior Research Symposium on Mental Health Science for her research paper entitled “A Randomized Phase I Trial of a Brief Computer-Delivered Intervention for Alcohol Use during Pregnancy.” Golflo trained at MPSI in 2009 under the mentorship of Dr. Steven Oondersma who is a co-author of the poster. She is now a postdoctoral fellow at Brown’s Center for Alcohol & Addiction Studies.

To host a Healthier Urban Families seminar, contact Bev Weathington at 313-872-1411 or ac878@wayne.edu. Professional development seminars and registration information are listed at www.mpsi.wayne.edu/outreach/urban-families.php. HUF also provides youth trainings to students from kindergarten through 12th grade.

www.mpsi.wayne.edu
Freer House Pulses with Music, Art and Drama

- by William Colburn
Director, Freer House Project

Art, music and song filled the Exhibition Gallery (also known as Hoobler Lounge) of Charles Lang Freer’s historic home as friends gathered in support of plans to restore the adjacent former Whistler Gallery. A consummate art collector, Freer built his first private gallery in a major addition to his home in 1906, filling it with natural light and dozens of his prized Whistler paintings. Since the 1950s however, the gallery has suffered several alterations to convert it into office space, changes that negatively affected its historic design and character. At one time, it was home to the Kresge Historical Library with dozens of book stacks lining the floor.

The Friends of the Freer House and MPSI have launched a fund-raising campaign to restore this room to its original design. The cubicle offices and drop ceilings would be removed and the room returned to its open plan as a space for meetings, conferences and exhibits. The friends announced this exciting project with the March benefit, drawing a capacity crowd for a creative multi-sensory immersion into Freer’s life and the former glory of the Whistler Gallery.

Whistler and Freer through Art, Music and Letters highlighted the remarkable friendship between these two men and the priceless Whistler works that Freer once displayed in his gallery. Guests viewed projected images of select paintings from Freer’s collection, while Detroit’s Scarab Club Ensemble played music carefully selected to accompany each work of art. Special guest tenor Damien Top from Paris sang. Personal letters between Freer and Whistler were dramatized by two talented actors from the WSU Theater Department. The blending of art, music and theater won rave reviews from the rapt audience and raised more than $2,000 toward the cost of a professional plan needed to guide future restoration and fund-raising.

Helping Children Find Their Voice

MPSI welcomed a new neighbor to Ferry Street with the arrival of the Kids-TALK Child Advocacy Center in February. Kids-TALK is a child-friendly environment where children in suspected cases of sexual abuse can be interviewed by highly-trained, experienced and caring professionals. The center also offers trauma-focused treatment at no cost to these children. Dr. Valerie Simon, a MPSI faculty member, belonged to the Wayne County Task Force that spearheaded the expansion of the center and its new location in Detroit. In January, she received special recognition from Wayne County for her outstanding service to the task force.

Dr. Simon is partnering with Kids-TALK on two lines of research: one that seeks to understand the emergence of sexual risk behavior in adolescent girls with histories of child sexual abuse, and another that seeks to enhance the use of mental health services by youth and families attending the center.
Treatment for Alcohol Abuse at the Tips of Your Fingers

Pregnant women who drink alcohol risk the health and development of their babies, but identifying these mothers and motivating them to change has been a major health-care challenge. MPSI faculty member Dr. Steven Ondersma is taking a new approach to the problem, using handheld devices and tablet PC’s (small, touch-screen computers) to change behavior. He won a $665,500 grant this April to pilot the clinical trial of a computerized intervention to help pregnant women decrease their alcohol use. “Technology is going to be huge in facilitating interventions that can really have an impact on the population,” he said.

For several years, Dr. Ondersma has researched cost-effective and broad-based methods of decreasing or eliminating illegal drug use during and after pregnancy. Now he is testing similar computerized methods to reduce prenatal exposure to alcohol, particularly binge drinking. The three-year grant from the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse will fund the development of intervention, procedure and measures, as well as a 5-person pilot clinical trial. If all goes as planned, data from the pilot program will inform a larger clinical trial.

“Rather than reaching only the few people who attend treatment for alcohol abuse, we can access large portions of at-risk women . . .”
— Dr. Steven Ondersma

4. Evaluate the validity of Ethyl Glucoconidase (EGC) as a urine test for alcohol use. EGC is highly sensitive and has been known to detect alcohol in persons who have merely inhaled the fumes of alcohol hand sanitizers, but also shows great promise as an objective measure of alcohol use.

Prenatal exposure to alcohol can have negative effects on cognition, socialization, and behavior and is a major cause of mental retardation. Because this damage can occur early in gestation, the computerized screening and interventions will take place in the first trimester, with an EGC test of alcohol use at the time of delivery. Dr. Ondersma believes strongly in the value of brief, low-cost computerized interventions to slow or stop the effects of alcohol on the unborn child.

“Our goal is to motivate self-change in parents, and to have a meaningful impact on the health of large numbers of children,” he said. “This approach allows us to do both.”

Wayne Graduate Thankful for Early Childhood Center

As a teen, Madelyn Tucker didn’t think much about college. High school was hard enough, so hard she dropped out. Eventually she got her GED and took a run at college a few times but with no success. “I had a long checkered history of starting school and leaving,” she says. “We moved. I got married. We had a son.” Life offered plenty of solid reasons to give up.

Until she enrolled at Wayne State and discovered MPSI’s Early Childhood Center in 2006. Her son Julius had just turned three. She and her husband were doing the childcare “shuffle” as she calls it. “Today is my day. Tomorrow is your day. This is the day to call mom,” Madelyn says. Without dependable childcare, life was “chaotic. It’s hard on parents and hard on the kids, but mainly hard on the kids.”

Madelyn got an email explaining CCAMPIS and Wayne’s on-site childcare centers and soon enrolled Julius at the Early Childhood Center – for free. CCAMPIS stands for Childcare Access Means Parents in School, a federal grant program that pays basic preschool tuition for children of low-income parents while they pursue college degrees. CCAMPIS requires at least half-time enrollment and a minimum grade point average of 2.0. Madelyn is full-time with a 3.9 GPA.

“Once you have kids, you get a lot more serious about education.”

Julius thrived in the program, improving his social development and honing already excellent problem-solving skills. He’s in first grade now where his teacher praises his helpfulness and good ideas. Daughter Lorelei, 3, started at the ECC in September. She “loves Miss Lisa, loves school and loves all her friends,” Madelyn says. Madelyn has excelled in school, too. She graduates on May 5 with a bachelor’s degree in environmental sciences and a minor in geology. “Can you believe it?” she laughs.

That’s just the beginning. Madelyn won fellowships from both Wayne and the University of Michigan to pursue her master’s degree in biology. She’s chosen to stay at Wayne for now, but she’ll have to go else-where for the doctorate she plans to earn. “I want to teach and research, hopefully at a university,” the woman who once couldn’t stay in school. “Once you have kids, you get a lot more serious about education. I think about all the hours I spend away from them. I need to show something for it.” In addition to discipline, Madelyn’s success in the classroom required free, high-quality childcare. “The CCAMPIS help meant a lot to our whole family. We tell everyone about it. It’s been huge for us.”

To learn more about MPSI research, visit www.mpsi.wayne.edu

To learn more about the EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER call Sue Madro at 313-873-0724
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES
All programs held from 9:00 am – 12:15 pm at 71 East Ferry Street, Detroit 48202
Registration fee: Professionals $50, students $15
Details and registration at http://www.mpsi.wayne.edu/outreach/urban-families.php

Embracing Families and Honoring Differences (3 CE, 3 SB-CEU)
Wednesday, May 25
Child Sexual Abuse: Interviewing, Interventions and Research (3 CE, 5 SB-CEU pending)
Wednesday, June 22
Exploitations in Development Professional Conference Oct. 14 -15
For social workers, nurses, educators, and therapists
8:30 am – 4:00 pm at WSU Oakland Center
Explore issues affecting infants, youth and families. Contact hours, CEUs and SB-CEUs available.
Speakers and topics posted on www.mpsi.wayne.edu after June 1.

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS: If you enjoy working with young teens and have spare time, please consider helping with this year’s Giant Step Teen Conference, “Inclusion, Harmony, Acceptance.” Giant Step takes place on Thursday, November 3, 8:30 am – 2 pm on Wayne State’s campus. Volunteers needed for set-up, conference duties and with experience facilitating discussions. Please call LeShone Hall at 313-574-1960 or canihelpu05@yahoo.com for more information.