

**A** kidney-transplant surgeon, a public health advisor for the CDC, an orthodontist, a nurse-educator, the managing director of Credit-Suisse, a former Catholic priest, a UN civilian peacekeeper in the Sudan, and a professional comedian walk into ... well, a profoundly life-changing experience.

It may sound like the opening of a (very complicated) joke, but this is no laughing matter—it's all about the serious business of adding to the world's happiness by applying the tenets of positive psychology.

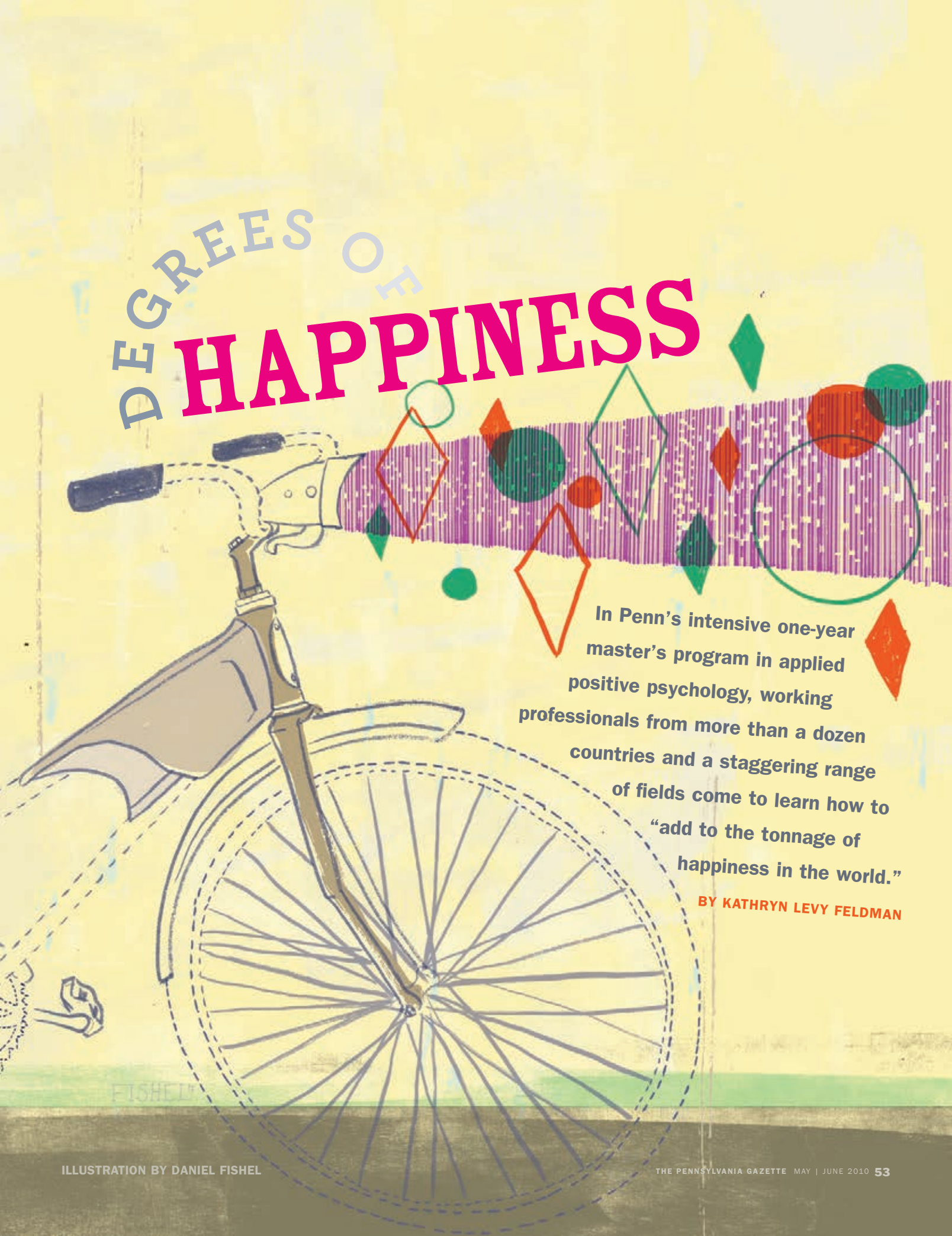
The list above is just a sampling of the professions represented among the 150 or so graduates of Penn's master's degree program in applied positive psychology (MAPP). (The professional comedian, by the way, is Yakov Smirnoff CGS'06—perhaps best known for his role in *Moscow on*

*the Hudson* with Robin Williams, and the catchphrase "What a country!"—who currently performs at his own theater in Branson, Missouri.) Dozens more MAPP graduates teach or are administrators at elementary and secondary schools. About 20 percent have changed careers after completing the program, becoming consultants, coaches, and motivational speakers. MAPP alumni are working to incorporate the principles of positive psychology into law, business, education, medicine, politics, engineering, the arts, even the military—pretty remarkable considering that the field itself has only been around for a dozen years or so and the MAPP program is just now celebrating its fifth anniversary.





# DEGREES OF HAPPINESS



In Penn's intensive one-year master's program in applied positive psychology, working professionals from more than a dozen countries and a staggering range of fields come to learn how to "add to the tonnage of happiness in the world."

BY KATHRYN LEVY FELDMAN

**Penn's is the first master's degree in positive psychology**—which makes sense, since the discipline is generally recognized as the brainchild of the University's own Martin Seligman Gr'67, the Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology, who advocated for it as a counterweight to the profession's focus on mental illness during his term as president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, and whose research forms much of its intellectual backbone ["Martin Seligman's Journey from Learned Helplessness to Learned Happiness," Jan/Feb 1999].

The website of the Penn Positive Psychology Center, which Seligman directs, defines the discipline as "the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive." The master's program focuses both on the theory behind positive psychology and on how it can be applied in various professional contexts.

"We take the 'A' [for] 'applied' very seriously, although we don't specify how to do so," says MAPP's James Pawelski, director of education and senior scholar. "We give our students the tools to bring about change, but it is up to them to apply these tools in their particular areas of expertise."

The program's target audience is working professionals, and the majority of graduates—about 60 percent—return to their original fields, but with fresh insights and added value. "It is not a profession-specific degree," explains Deborah Swick, associate director of education. "Once you learn about the science with cumulative research behind it, you are worth more to your organization. Many people get promotions or take their businesses in new directions."

"It was the richest academic experience of my life," says 30-year-old Sasha Heinz CGS'06, who earned an undergraduate degree from Harvard, a MAPP in 2006, and is currently pursuing a doctorate in psychology at Columbia University's Teachers College. "Our professors were the best of the best—the heads of departments all over the country—and the amount of time they took with us was extraordinary."

The MAPP is offered through the University's College of Liberal and Professional Studies (LPS). (Until Fall 2008, LPS was called the College of General Studies, which is why gradu-

# “Every spring we have to work on the ‘I don’t want to leave syndrome.’”

ates from classes before that have CGS after their names.) The full-time, one-year program mixes 10 residential stays on campus (an initial five-day introduction and orientation in September, followed by Friday-Saturday-Sunday meetings through the academic year) with distance learning by telephone, webcast, and other online methods, which vary by course and individual instructor.

All students take the same eight classes (four per semester), a sequence that begins with Seligman's Introduction to Positive Psychology, detailing the field's "research, theory, and intellectual history." Other courses look at research methods and evaluation, examine different approaches to "the good life," analyze character strengths and virtues, and explore how positive psychology can be applied to individuals and organizations. Students also cover the foundations of "positive interventions"—exercises shown to increase happiness—and participate in a service-learning course to "study the applied work of master positive psychology practitioners and create positive psychology applications for non-profit organizations." A summer independent study capstone project "that integrates what the student has learned in the MAPP program and advances the application of positive psychology" completes the requirements for the master's degree.

MAPP alumni range widely in age—the youngest graduate to date was 23 and the oldest 63—and come from pretty much all over: Europe (England, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Scotland), Asia (South Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates), Australia, and New Zealand, as well as the United States.

In the current class, which will complete work this August, there are two students who commute from the UK, two from New Zealand, and one from Australia. At 45 members, this class is MAPP's largest ever; previous classes have ranged from 34 to 41, selected from hundreds of applicants.

With most students holding down full-time jobs while they attain their degree, MAPP is not for the undisciplined or unmotivated. Nor is it for those seeking New Age enlightenment.

"I wanted to learn something based on hard science that would provide me with a competitive edge," explains Brian Selander CGS'08, currently the chief strategy officer for Delaware Governor Jack Markell, and a former radio host, political aide, business executive, and consultant. "A critical question at any job needs to be: how am I adding unique value to my company or organization?"

"I was transformed as a mother, daughter, wife, friend, and entrepreneur," says Caroline Miller CGS'06, who graduated with the first MAPP class. Miller is a performance coach and motivational speaker, and the author of *Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide* (an outgrowth of her capstone project).

For Kathryn Britton CGS'06, "The MAPP program was intellectually fulfilling and allowed me to reorient my life to be more aligned with my values." Britton worked as a software programmer for IBM for 25 years. Currently, she runs her own coaching practice and teaches positive workplace concepts at the University of Maryland, while contributing to numerous online positive-psychology publications—including *Positive Psychology News*



*Daily*, a site about the latest research in the field that is currently approaching its one millionth page view, founded by classmate Senia Maymin CGS'06.

The insights of positive psychology can come in handy in some unlikely venues—the dentist's chair, for instance. "I've learned to be better at motivating my patients to comply with the protocols of their treatments," says South Carolina orthodontist Leslie Pitner G'94 CGS'07. "But I've also learned to be a better business person and leader to my staff."

"MAPP was life changing," concurs Elaine O'Brien CGS'08, a professional fitness/dance trainer and motivational speaker who is currently working with Seligman on the Positive Psychology Center's positive health initiative, which focuses on the role of physical activity in promoting positive health. "The inter-class connections are so rich and the excellence of my fellow students was astonishing. I was inspired by so many others."

Seligman's call for a "science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called 'the good life,'" as he put it in *Authentic Optimism*, his 2002 bestseller, was a timely one, for both good and ill. It more or less coincided with an explosion in the self-help industry aimed at addressing emotional happiness: Books, audio and videotapes, seminars, one-on-one sessions with life coaches, and other products poured forth and found an eager audience. While this has helped raise positive psychology's profile very quickly, it has also engendered a fair amount of confusion when it comes to separating the science from the hype.

"There's a danger of the publicity [about the field] far exceeding the science," Seligman noted in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* report on the first meeting of the International Positive Psychology Association in Philadelphia this past fall, attended by more than 1,500 people from 52 countries. Another leader in the field, Barbara Fredrickson, Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Principal Investigator of the Positive Emotions Psychophysiology Lab

at the University of North Carolina, put the issue more bluntly: "The curse of working in this area is having to distinguish it from *Chicken Soup for the Soul*."

Positive psychology's content is based upon what Seligman calls "three pillars" of scientific inquiry: positive emotion, positive traits (strengths and virtues) and positive institutions. From the beginning, Seligman enlisted the help of leaders in the field to pursue these inquiries, notably Ed Diener, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and senior scientist for the Gallup Organization; Raymond Fowler, professor emeritus at the University of Alabama and past president of the APA; Chris Peterson, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan and co-author with Seligman of *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*; and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, professor of psychology and director of quality of life research at Claremont Graduate University, all of whom teach in the MAPP program.

Seligman gave himself the task of raising money, an endeavor at which, by all accounts, he has been incredibly successful. "I've spent a good part of my adult life begging one agency or another for funds ... and my knees are just about worn out," he writes in *Authentic Happiness*. "Raising funds for positive psychology, in contrast, was a walk in the park."

That stroll has helped garner more than \$226 million in grants to researchers in positive psychology over the last 10 years from the National Institute of Mental Health. More funding has come from the John Templeton Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (which supports the current initiative in positive health), the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and numerous private foundations.

"We were streetwise enough to know that change in the focus of a science does not occur unless there are jobs, grants, prizes, and supportive colleagues," Seligman adds.

From the beginning, he was also intent on making the field "understandable and attractive" to non-experts and scholars alike. "Marty has always been dedicated to making sure that the science doesn't stay in the journals," says Pawelski.

Among the MAPP alumni demonstrating the applicability of positive psychology over a broad range of professions are corporate CEO Peter Worrell LPS'09; Primrose O'Teng LPS'09, a United Nations civilian peacekeeper in the Sudan; and Peter Minich LPS'06, a practicing physician and transplant surgeon, who is also an author, educator, and leadership consultant.

From day one, Worrell, 52, was adamant about making his MAPP experience relevant to his job as the chief executive of the Bigelow Company, which provides strategic advice to owner-managed enterprises. "I don't give up my time lightly," says Worrell, who commuted to Penn from his home in New Hampshire. "I'm a practitioner in the middle of my career, and I was dead serious about applying what I learned in the real world."

A student of behavioral economics who joined the Bigelow Company the day after he earned an MBA from Babson College in 1980, Worrell was looking for an academically rigorous program that would provide him with a theoretical foundation in positive psychology to complement his existing expertise.

He learned about Seligman's work while serving on a panel on behavioral economics at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "Behavioral economics looks at the way people make risky decisions incorrectly, and I wondered why we spent so much time talking about mistakes," he recalls. "Afterwards, a participant told me about Seligman's work. I looked up the MAPP program and applied instantly."

Last fall, Worrell invited University of Michigan professor and Seligman co-author Chris Peterson and another scholar who teaches in the MAPP program—Barry Schwartz, professor of social theory and social action at Swarthmore—as featured speakers at the annual Bigelow Forum, to which his company invites about 100 strategic advisors from around the country.

The reaction was "electric," says Worrell. "I think Chris was blown away by the fact that we were actually using the tools, like the VIA signature strengths, to impact our business." (VIA, for values in action, is a survey devised by Peterson to measure 24 character strengths.)

Positive psychology's insights have also affected the way he deals with clients, Worrell adds. "Now when I approach a client I do not ask them about the problems or weaknesses in their businesses. I ask them to tell me about the times the business was at its best. It has been enormously successful." Along those lines, Worrell is expanding his capstone research, which identified the signature strengths of entrepreneurs, to make it directly applicable to family owned businesses, which represent a large percentage of his clientele. "The program provided me with the tools and vocabulary to truly set our business apart from other strategic advisors," he says. "Positive psychology is a differentiator."

After almost 10 years of working for the UN as a civilian peacekeeper, predominantly in Darfur, Primrose O'Teng, a 30-year-old native of Botswana, knows firsthand that the process is painstaking. And while she is still inspired by the founding mission of the United Nations, a call "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," she is not immune to the frustrations that often accompany long-term peacekeeping obligations. "For the amount of financial and human resources being expended, overall peace consolidation under both the peacemaking and peacekeeping processes remain lamentably low," she emails from Khartoum, Sudan. "I feel that efforts to promote and maintain peace in conflict settings still need improvement."

She believes that MAPP provided her with the tools and evidence to support her growing belief that the traditional method of peacekeeping focused too exclusively on what was going wrong in areas in which the UN was trying to negotiate and maintain harmony. "Failing to take stock of where societies were doing well was, more often than not, leading to a distorted perception of the problems that existed and a failure to recognize people's capacity to deal with them," she notes. "I am interested in how we can pursue UN ideals while taking into account individual responsibility and empowerment."

Today she is an advocate for what she calls "strength-based peacekeeping," using processes she learned in MAPP. For example, an approach called Appreciative Inquiry (defined as "the search for the best in people, their organizations, and

the relevant world around them") can help "to devise shared positive objectives for peacekeeping operations or indeed, countries which those operations are intended to serve," she says. She is also sharing tools for resilience (like increasing positive emotions or focusing on strengths) with her fellow peacekeepers, who are frequently deployed to hardship areas for years at a time.

Having come to the MAPP program looking for "an innovative way to create sustainable peace," O'Teng believes she has not only found it, but is practicing and promulgating it. And while change may not happen overnight, she is confident that she is making inroads with those responsible for policy making. Soon, she writes, "the ideas will be widely adopted throughout the UN. While this may take time, my passion for it, and my belief in the veracity of positive psychology principles, makes me believe it's worth the effort."

As a physician who has practiced on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border, Peter Minich knows firsthand about the failures of different healthcare systems to deliver quality care to patients. Minich, 47, spent the first decade of his medical career directing kidney-transplant programs in Chicago and Nashville. By the mid-1990s, he says he "saw the profession at a crossroads. We could continue to deliver what was being deemed cost-effective care, but which was really less than was possible, or we could develop positive models for change."

Frustrated by the anger and apathy evinced by many of his colleagues—"a classic example of learned helplessness," he says, invoking Seligman's formulation—Minich enrolled in the PhD program at Vanderbilt University in organizational leadership, where his research focused on modeling physician leaders.

What he discovered was that simple changes in physician behavior could often lead to better outcomes for the patients as well as the hospital. "There was a financial model for what I was doing," he explains. "Complications are costly. If we can give physicians the tools and skills to communicate how they can help avoid complications, it is often a win-win situation."

A case in point was the transplant unit that Minich headed at Centennial Hospital in Nashville, where he tripled the size of the program in five years, completing 100

transplants with 100 percent success. "I inherited a program filled with high-risk patients, and what I demonstrated was that the hospital could achieve the most profit, with the best patient outcomes, even with a high-risk population," he says.

While in Nashville, Minich met James Pawelski, who was then teaching philosophy at Vanderbilt. Pawelski introduced him to Seligman and, after coming to Penn to head the MAPP program, encouraged Minich to become a member of its first class.

For his MAPP research, Minich focused on the effects of thoughts and emotion in behavior, furthering his expertise in both the psychology of leadership and the interplay between mental wellness and disease, an area of critical importance in his clinical practice. "The MAPP program added more theory and depth to my work," he says.

Today, besides having authored two books—*Sick Patients Sicker System* (with Terrence Deal) and *Rethinking Power in Healthcare: What to Do When Authority Fails and Patients Suffer*—Minich runs a private practice in Toronto and is chief of urology and serves on the faculty at Cleveland Clinic Canada. He has also worked with many healthcare organizations around the world, including the Canadian Medical Association and the Health Corporation of America. He is the founder of the Center for Clinician Leadership, runs leadership retreats for hospitals and healthcare organizations, and has made it his life's mission to improve the quality of care delivered in hospitals.

Worrell, O'Teng, and Minich are representative of alumni who speak of "MAPP magic." The attractions of the program are such that, "every spring we have to work on the 'I don't want to leave syndrome,'" says MAPP associate director of education Deborah Swick. In response, program leaders have devised a yearly summit weekend to which alumni—some 40 of whom attended the most recent gathering—are invited to share their experiences with current students. Caroline Miller remembers Seligman telling her class that he didn't want them there "unless we could add to the tonnage of happiness in the world." MAPP alumni seem to have taken the assignment to heart. ♦

**Kathryn Levy Feldman LPS'09 last wrote about alumnus Scott Mackler's battle with ALS.**