

CLASS NOTES

1978

Sharon A. Falkenheimer, of Albany, NY, continues volunteering to teach healthcare professionals in low- and middle-income countries several times each year.

1979 Reunion
September 20•21, 2024

1983

Robert C. Morgan, of Oswego, NY, has retired after 40 years of practice and is enjoying his two grandsons ages three and eighteen months. "I am now a licensed Merchant

Marine Captain and doing lighthouse tours for the Maritime Museum in Oswego. I'm working hard to refit our 85-foot two masted schooner and hope to have it in the water again in 2025. Come to Oswego and see all the things we are doing on Lake Ontario," he writes.

1984 Reunion
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1985

Stephen F. Coccaro, Setauket, NY, is president of Blanca's House, and recently returned from a medical mission in Ecuador. The mission was completed in their own Day Hospital that they built from a private home in Guayaquil. "Anyone interested in going on a medical mission please contact Blancashouse.org."



Stephen F. Coccaro '85

MICHAEL NORKO, MD '83

Psychiatry and the Law

In 1999, Connecticut became the first state to enact a law allowing police to seize firearms from people deemed violent or suicidal. Since then, 22 other states have enacted some version of a risk-based gun removal law, often referred to as red-flag laws. Forensic psychiatrist Michael Norko, MD '83, believes those laws have saved lives, at least from suicide.

Dr. Norko has been part of research teams that have analyzed gun removal data, first from Connecticut and more recently, the largest national study conducted, analyzing data from six states. "We can demonstrate the utility of these laws in terms of reducing self-harm and research on other outcomes continues," he says.

While mass shootings garner more public attention, their rarity makes population-based outcome studies virtually impossible, he says.

During more than three decades of practice, Norko has become an expert on concepts of dangerousness and risk in psychiatric practice. He spent 17 years at the Whiting Forensic Hospital, Connecticut's maximum security psychiatric hospital. In his first role as a unit chief, he supervised 18 patients, 13 of whom had been found not guilty by reason of insanity for homicide.

"It was a new unit made possible with funding from the Department of Correction, which wanted to send us people they didn't have resources to adequately care for," Norko says. "It was very interesting work to set goals and vision for the unit. Some of the people were quite ill and didn't get much better but others made good progress."

Norko would go on to become associate director for hospital operations, medical director, and director/CEO. In 2007, he became director of forensic services for the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, where he worked to develop programs and laws to improve the public mental health system in its service to people involved in the criminal justice system. He stepped down from that role this summer but remains a forensic policy advisor.

Norko has also been a full-time faculty member at Yale University School of Medicine since 2000, where he is professor of psychiatry. While serving as director at Whiting, he attended Yale Divinity School, earning a master of arts in religion in 2010. Subsequently, he has broadened his focus from psychiatry and the law to issues related to psychiatry, spirituality, and religion.



Michael Norko, MD '83

That included developing an elective course for medical students and residents.

"Regardless of their own worldview, most of their patients are going to have some spiritual or religious views that are important to them," says Norko, who chairs the Psychiatry and Religion Committee of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (GAP) and is secretary of the Caucus on Spirituality, Religion and Psychiatry of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). "These are issues patients want to talk about in treatment, so clinicians need to develop more comfort in dealing with them."

Another area of focus is advising faith-based communities on the well-being of LGBTQ youth, with a goal to reduce suicide and other harms. Working with GAP's religion and psychiatry and LGBTQ committees, he spearheaded development of a booklet and toolkit that addresses ways in which faith leaders and faith communities can support LGBTQ youth to mitigate mental health challenges. "We were asked and granted permission to have it translated and used in Finland by the Evangelical Lutheran Church," he says.

Norko has long had an interest in the intersection of medicine and the humanities. He was attracted to Upstate Medical University by its medical humanities curriculum and was further sold when he was interviewed by the late Bruce Dearing, who is memorialized at Upstate through an annual writing competition.

He found a close-knit group of classmates who had similar interests, including his future wife, Debra Brown-Norko '83 (a retired pediatrician who earned a master of

divinity degree at Yale Divinity School in 2022 and now works in retreat ministry). Their group initiated the first memorial service for their cadaver donors, a tradition that continues today.

Norko says he was drawn to the interpersonal dimension of psychiatry "as opposed to the biomechanical dimensions of a lot of other specialties." He did his residency at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City, where he became involved in a research study about people's ability to consent to voluntary psychiatric hospitalization. As a result, he was nominated and selected for the Rappeport Fellowship of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL), which was only in its second year.

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"It provided the opportunity to attend AAPL's national meeting, where I met all these nationally and internationally famous forensic psychiatrists. I was hooked," says Norko, who completed a forensic psychiatry fellowship at Yale.

Norko is past president of the Connecticut Psychiatric Society and past president of AAPL. He has served as editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* since 2019. His many honors include the Manfred S. Guttmacher Award from the APA and AAPL, given for outstanding contribution to the literature on forensic psychiatry; and being named a Distinguished Life Fellow by the APA.

Norko describes the vocation of forensic psychiatry as a spiritual quest but says his integration of spirituality into his professional life is not unique. "I think it's a universal part of finding purpose in your life, to think about what we do in our profession as being meaningful to our life and our existence," he says.

—Renée Gearhart Levy