

“As a team, we are ‘on fire with purpose and passion to end violence, in all its forms,’ and we center minoritized populations in our work to reduce health and social disparities.”

Dr. Heather
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Dr. Joanne (Jo)
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For more information about what the SPARK-ers are up to, please visit <https://www.spark4change.com> or contact Heather (mccauley49@msu.edu) and Jo (smit3167@msu.edu).

School faculty “SPARK Research for Social Change”

The stars aligned for us in August 2019. Independently, we were researchers with robust, federally funded portfolios focused on the prevention of sexual violence. **Heather McCauley**, a social epidemiologist, had spent the previous decade evaluating school- and clinic-based sexual violence prevention programs, with emphasis on LGBTQ populations. **Joanne (Jo) Smith-Darden**, a social worker and developmental psychologist, brought to the School over 40 years of experience in training, practicing, consulting, and evaluating service delivery in a variety of settings, including conducting a decade of CDC-funded research on sexual violence among adolescents. We arrived at MSU School of Social Work looking for a community of scholars and practitioners to partner with to expand our reach and impact.

The first time we met, we couldn’t speak fast enough. Our excitement grew as it quickly became clear that we shared values around community engagement and social justice. As a result of those initial conversations, we began meeting weekly with a national team of scholars to pursue funding opportunities for our work. We also circled the state to introduce our shared vision and listen to our community partners’ needs.

Between the two of us, we submitted 17 grant applications within 14 months to address these needs, often working together late into the night to convince funders to provide infrastructure for our collective work. Our efforts paid off. We are currently principal investigators or co-investigators on five federal research projects totaling \$7.2 million dollars and have received funding from the

MSU Center for Gender in Global Context to expand our work globally. We are so thankful for this support.

A year after meeting, we embraced the lab model and launched the SPARK Research for Social Change lab in the MSU School of Social Work. SPARK is a values-driven research lab aiming to promote equity and social justice through community-partnered research, training, and practice.

As a team, we are “on fire with purpose and passion to end violence, in all its forms,” and we center minoritized populations in our work to reduce health and social disparities. Specifically, we are conducting a sexual violence policy evaluation in Michigan school districts, evaluating a social marketing campaign to promote community-level norms that protect against sexual bullying, and expanding the minority stress model to include the experiences of transgender and gender diverse individuals.

The SPARK lab comprises School of Social Work doctoral students **Jamie Kynn** and **Jenny Tanis**, MSW students **Cassandra Jones**, **Brigitte Thornes**, and **Lindsey Rudden**, and BASW student **Lily Giancaspro**.

Beyond embracing a lab model, we embrace a team science approach to our work. We see value in bringing interdisciplinary voices to the table relative to an integrated and interactive quest for scientific discovery and translational research. And we acknowledge that our success, in large part, is due to our conceptual understanding of shared leadership that is grounded in trust and a shared vision.