

Meet two talented Clarke alumni excelling in their STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) careers.

Mariam Paracha

Pharmacist Bridges Cultures and Advocates for Accessibility

Mariam Paracha moved to Massachusetts from Pakistan at the age of six and began attending Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech in Northampton, Massachusetts, as a first grader in the K-8 Program. After graduating from Clarke in 2004, Mariam went on to Northampton High School where she continued to receive support from Clarke's Mainstream Services team.

"During my time at Clarke and while in high school, I felt proficient in science and math," remembers Mariam. "So I took AP Chemistry and AP Calculus which eventually led me to double major in biochemistry and neuroscience at UMass. Through a lab internship, I became very interested in therapies that treat novel diseases. Then I completed the doctorate in pharmacy program at MCPHS [Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences]."

Now Mariam is a post-doctoral fellow at the Center of Health and Technology and Department of Neurology at the University of Rochester Medical Center in Rochester, New York, where she investigates patterns of medication usage by participants in clinical trials and observational studies in HIV and Parkinson's disease. She also

addresses health disparities in Deaf communities and co-teaches a biology lab course at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

Mariam shares that her work has been affected by the pandemic. "I love networking at the University of Rochester because it helps me to achieve my goals," she says. But once the pandemic began, "I had to learn to be productive while working at home. I like that it allows me to have flexibility, but I miss interacting with people working around me."

In addition to her work and academic pursuits, Mariam is active with Global Deaf Muslim, an organization focusing on enhancing accessibility to Islam for individuals who are deaf. She's also involved with Deaf Partners in Health, Inc., and has shared content to help separate facts from hearsay around helpful treatments for coronavirus.

Looking ahead, Mariam says that her ideal job is to work as a pharmacological researcher studying medications and treatments, and she partially credits Clarke for her success. "Clarke taught me how to grow in my skills, manage my time and succeed in the hearing world," she says. "I am from Pakistan and we do not have this opportunity that Clarke offers. Without Clarke, I would not be able to successfully speak with my family. They are so thankful to be able to communicate with me."

In addition to communicating with her family and many colleagues in spoken English, Mariam has recently learned another language as well. "I learned ASL [American Sign Language] just before I moved to Rochester. And I love the fact that I am now bilingual in English and ASL!" 🌱

Mariam graduated from Clarke's K-8 Program in 2004 and received Mainstream Services throughout high school.



Alex Balsley

Engineer Cares for the Environment and his Community

Alex, who is profoundly deaf in both ears and wears digital hearing aids, attended Clarke's preschool and elementary school programs in Northampton, Massachusetts, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

"Clarke has been a big influence in shaping my deaf experience as a youth, and it was a great place for me to take speech therapy," he recalls. "I have fond memories of my time at the school and am grateful for all the speech therapists who made it a positive experience for me."

At the age of 10, with the support of an oral interpreter (now called an oral transliterator), Alex transitioned to a local mainstream elementary school, continuing his mainstream academics through high school. After high school, Alex attended Northeastern University in Boston. With support from American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, he graduated with a BS in civil/environmental engineering and a minor in environmental science. In 2014, he completed his MS in environmental engineering at Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

As an adult, Alex uses a combination of ASL (mostly) and spoken English to communicate and underscores the importance of honoring the unique needs of each child who is deaf or hard of hearing and their family. "Every deaf child has their own journey in this world and will eventually find their own deaf identity," he shares. "It takes time and effort to learn your options, including ASL, but they are well worth it."

Alex has enjoyed the past decade as a project manager with the Coast Guard Research and Development Center in New London, Connecticut. "I'm mostly involved with oil spill response research, and work with other federal agencies as well as private organizations to improve our spill response technologies or strategies," says Alex.

With much of his work travel on hold during the pandemic, Alex has been spending more time at home—hiking, running, enjoying extra time with his

wife Dru and reading fantasy novels. He's also thinking about racial equality and what he can do to make an impact in his community.

"I'm definitely early on in my journey and am still learning about the resources that I can contribute to," Alex says. "I'm learning about social injustices in New England, particularly in the Deaf community, and am looking for ways to get involved." Understanding systemic inequality demands a recognition of the intersectionality of identities and disabilities—specifically, the increased discrimination against individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and from marginalized communities.

Alex hopes to carry out this work as secretary of the Rhode Island Association of the Deaf, where he and his colleagues are early on in their efforts to explore ways to address racism and social injustice within their community. He is inspired by the work of the National Black Deaf Advocates and HEARD (Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of Deaf communities), an advocacy group supporting the rights of people who are deaf/disabled in prison and throughout the legal system and encourages others to lend them their support. 🌱

Alex, center, with colleagues from the United States Coast Guard.

