

STUDENT PROFILE

Becoming a Change-Agent

Thanks to her CEESP experience in 2025, **Mai Hussein** is now an incoming PhD student at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Hussein grew up in Egypt and lives in the United States. She was a dentist at Alexandria University and later receive graduate degrees at Harvard and Boston University.

“Before CEESP, I understood mentorship as guidance,” she recalls. “After CEESP, I understood it as accompaniment. There is a difference between someone who points you in the right direction and someone who walks the road with you.”



CEESP led to Hussein’s first author publication in the Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention journal. She is now preparing a second manuscript for publication and is at work on a third.

Voices: For your CEESP fellowship, you collaborated with the City University of New York School of Medicine, CUNY School of Public Health, and the Boston

University SPH. How did your CEESP fellowship change your life?

Mai Hussein: Looking back, many things carried me through: mentorship that was honest and demanding; access to data I could not have reached on my own; persistence through the weeks when things did not work as expected; consistency in reaching out and moving forward; flexibility to learn; resilience in overcoming challenges; and the motivation to keep going. CEESP did not just teach me methods. It showed me what it looks like to do the work with integrity, from start to finish.

Voices: Why do you feel CEESP is so important?

Mai Hussein: Many programs offer exposure. CEESP offers formation. The difference shows up in the publications, in the confidence to speak and present, and in how fellows carry the work forward to their next steps. It is an opportunity to be a change-maker in a global context. It is the kind of investment that does not stop with the person who receives it; it extends



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to future cancer researchers’ career development and the health equity of cancer populations. And that is exactly why it matters. ■

MENTOR PROFILE

A Formative Experience



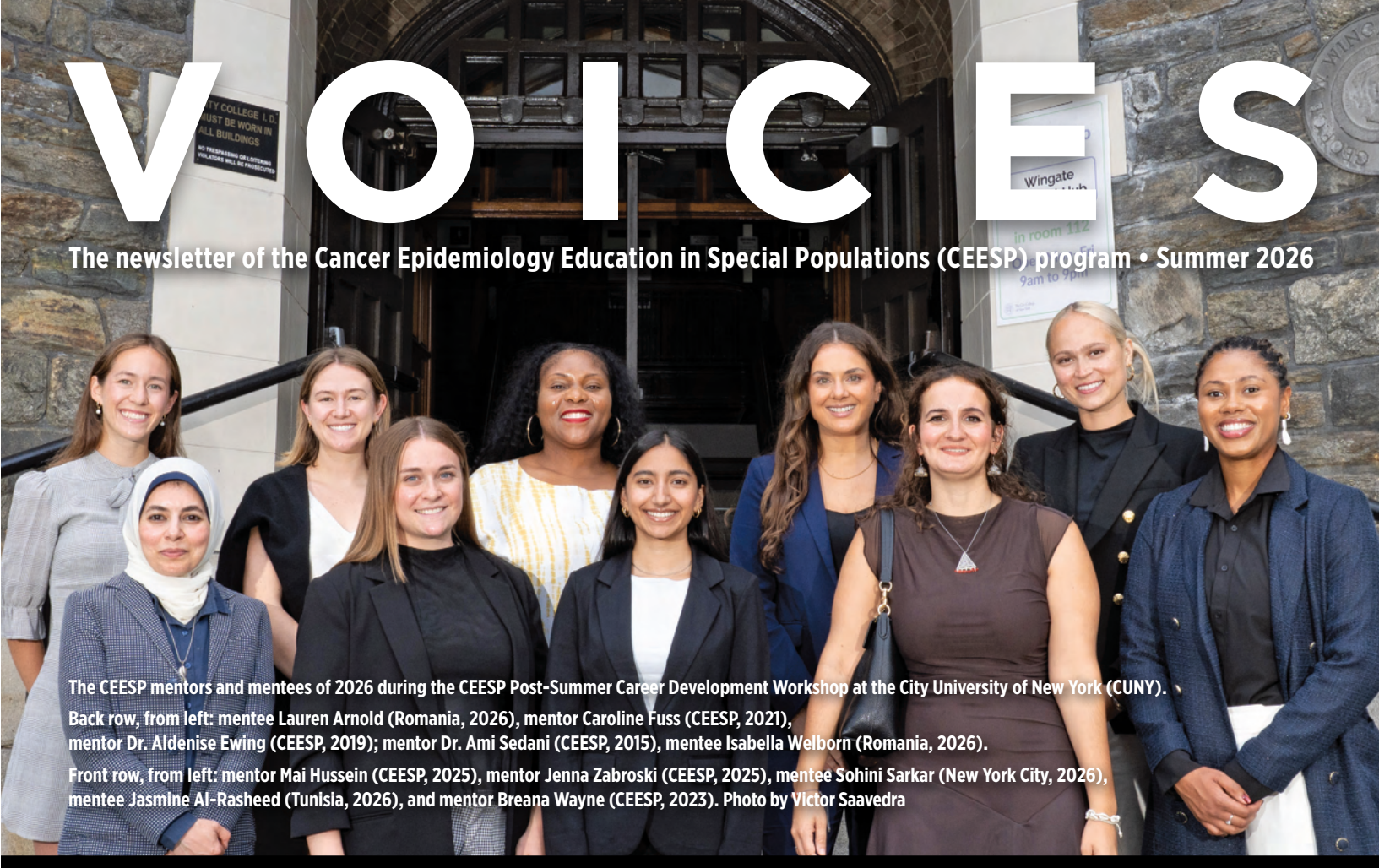
Pooja Yerram completed her CEESP fellowship 2024 at the Ocean Road Cancer Institute (ORCA) in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, while also completing an MPH in epidemiology at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. This fall she begins a PhD program in infectious disease epidemiology at the University of North Carolina Gilling School of Global Public Health. Her focus will be on HPV, HIV, cervical cancer prevention, and women’s health disparities in low-resource settings. CEESP has been instrumental in her education—which is why Yerram is so invested now in helping to train current and future CEESP students.

“I try to stay involved with CEESP students whenever I can, particularly by sharing advice about conducting research abroad, navigating IRB and manuscript processes, and adapting

“I especially hope to encourage students to embrace flexibility and curiosity.”

to field-based research environments. Because CEESP was such a formative experience for me, I want newer fellows to feel supported as they navigate both the logistical and personal challenges of international research.

“I especially hope to encourage students to embrace flexibility and curiosity. Some of the most meaningful parts of my experience came from learning how to adapt when projects evolved or when research conditions differed from what I originally expected. I also hope to reassure students that meaningful contributions can come from asking thoughtful questions, building strong local collaborations, and remaining open to learning from mentors, colleagues, and the communities they work with.” ■



The newsletter of the Cancer Epidemiology Education in Special Populations (CEESP) program • Summer 2026

The CEESP mentors and mentees of 2026 during the CEESP Post-Summer Career Development Workshop at the City University of New York (CUNY). Back row, from left: mentee Lauren Arnold (Romania, 2026), mentor Caroline Fuss (CEESP, 2021), mentor Dr. Aldenise Ewing (CEESP, 2019); mentor Dr. Ami Sedani (CEESP, 2015), mentee Isabella Welborn (Romania, 2026). Front row, from left: mentor Mai Hussein (CEESP, 2025), mentor Jenna Zabroski (CEESP, 2025), mentee Sohini Sarkar (New York City, 2026), mentee Jasmine Al-Rasheed (Tunisia, 2026), and mentor Breana Wayne (CEESP, 2023). Photo by Victor Saavedra

Mentorship Is at the Heart of Our Work



Now in our 20th year, CEESP is the proud host of not only current scholars at work globally, but also of numerous CEESP mentors who were themselves once CEESP scholars. It is immensely gratifying to see that our program has grown so successfully over the years. As one of this year’s CEESP scholars puts it, this growth “represents a chain of people investing in one another.” The program is also helping to create future generations of cancer researchers.

Our focus in this issue of *Voices* is on the connections between past CEESP mentors and present CEESP mentees, with an ever-present eye on future CEESP mentors and mentees. We have

now graduated more than 250 students from the program, many of whom have gone on to prominent university and cancer research positions.

While a large number of our current students are doing research projects in the United States this summer, others are working in global settings, including Botswana, Egypt, Lithuania, Romania, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Thailand, and Tanzania—which has been a CEESP site for 20 years. At home in the United States, CEESP students are working in places such as New York, California, and Washington, D.C.

In all of these sites, CEESP mentors are critical, which demonstrates how crucial mentorship is to our effort. We differ from other training programs because we require students to develop, research, conduct, and publish their

individual research projects. Several of the students profiled in this issue of *Voices* have already published their first papers and are working on the next. Throughout their training, students work under the guidance of mentors both on-campus and off-campus.

We look forward to hearing about this summer’s training experiences at our annual post-summer workshop on August 19-21. This year’s workshop will feature an increased number of CEESP alumni and mentors. We’re also eager to embark on the renewal process for our five-year grant. As always, I am deeply grateful to all of you for your ongoing support of our program. ■

Amr S. Soliman, MD, PhD
CEESP Program Director

About the Program

The Cancer Epidemiology Education in Special Populations (CEESP) Program includes a four-month summer field research experience in foreign countries and among minority populations in the U.S. CEESP faculty and field collaborators have the experience to provide expert field mentorship, with the aim of training participants to implement studies in ethnically diverse settings. Since its founding in 2006, CEESP has trained over 250 students who are now pursuing careers around the world.

Apply for 2027

CEESP is accepting applications for the summer of 2027. Open to MPH and first-year PhD students in public health, this unique, fully funded research training program provides critical field research experience in over 20 countries, including the United States.

For more information or to apply visit <http://ceesp.ccny.cuny.edu>

VOICES

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MENTOR PROFILE

Why Research Matters

For Breana Wayne, mentorship is fundamental.



CEESP mentor Breana Wayne (fourth from left) with her mentor Dr. Mohamed Zaghoul and colleagues at Children's Cancer Hospital in Egypt.

Breana Wayne holds a BS in biochemistry and chemistry-business from Bradley University and an MPH from Washington University in St. Louis. The MPH taught her, she says, “to understand the why behind



research—why dissemination matters, why prevention matters, and how research can actually change systems and outcomes. That’s when I stopped thinking of research as a requirement and started seeing it as a responsibility.” During her CEESP work in Egypt, Wayne focused on pediatric brain tumors and radiotherapy utilization. She says her biggest takeaway from her CEESP experience was “learning how to be adaptable.” In her own words here, Breana Wayne reflects on her CEESP work and its current impact:

“Over the past seven to eight years, research has become such a core part of who I am. At first, it was something I thought I had to do for medical school. But over time, it became something I genuinely care about. I’ve seen how research has the power to answer questions that directly impact people’s lives—not just one patient at a time, but entire populations.

“When Dr. Soliman talks about addressing fear, I understand that deeply because I’ve lived it. There’s a fear of not knowing enough, not

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belonging, or not being prepared. I felt all of that. But what I learned is that those feelings don’t mean you shouldn’t be there—they mean you’re growing. Now, as a mentor to CEESP students today, I try to normalize that experience. I want students to understand that it’s okay to not have all the answers—as long as they are willing to learn and take initiative.

“For me, mentorship means helping someone walk into a space with confidence instead of fear. If I can help them make transition even a little easier, then I’ve done my job.” ■

STUDENT PROFILE

Mentorship Extends from Generation to Generation

Every mentor was once a mentee.

Fernando Hernandez, a first-year student at Stanford University, is currently pursuing a PhD in epidemiology and clinical research. He holds a BS in public health from the University of California, San Diego, and an MPH in epidemiology and biostatistics from the University of California, Berkeley. His experience as a CEESP mentee in 2024 “was instrumental,” he says, “as the program provided me with time, mentorship, and funding to initiate and develop the research that later led to my publication ‘The impact of environmental contamination, air pollution, and social deprivation on childhood leukemia survival in California.’” CEESP also gave Hernandez the opportunity “to work closely with my mentor, Dr. Melissa Bondy, whose guidance was essential.”



“I feel grateful and honored to be a part of a growing line of mentors and mentees,” Hernandez says. “To me, mentorship is one of the greatest gifts someone can give, sharing time, guidance, and

belief in another person’s potential. It’s especially meaningful to recognize that every mentor was once a mentee, shaped by the influence of their own mentor, and that this process continues to impact future generation.”

Hernandez’s current mentor, Melissa Bondy, was herself a mentor to Amr Soliman, founder and director of CEESP. While a student at UC, Berkeley, Hernandez was also mentored by Catherine Metayer, who helped him “brainstorm” the project that ultimately led him to be accepted into CEESP.

“Mentorship extends beyond any single individual,” Hernandez believes. “It represents a chain of people investing in one another, passing along opportunities, knowledge, and support to future generations of students and researchers.” ■

MENTOR PROFILE

CEESP Is Incredibly Meaningful

Mentor Jen Cruz now sees health as deeply complex.



A new tenure-track professor at CUNY, where she is a faculty colleague of CEESP Director Amr Soliman, Jen Cruz did her CEESP fellowship in India in 2019. When COVID-19 broke out, she shifted to domestic research, a focus she continues to explore in rural and immigrant communities in the United States. Having experienced CEESP mentorship herself, Cruz is now mentoring current CEESP students and applicants. She holds an MPH from the University of Michigan and a PhD from Harvard.

“It’s incredibly meaningful to trace my CUNY professorship back to first meeting Dr. Soliman through CEESP in 2019,” Cruz says. “The CEESP experience played a foundational role in shaping me as an independent researcher, introduc-

“The CEESP experience played a foundational role in shaping me as an independent researcher.”

ing me to global and community-engaged cancer prevention research, and helping me build relationships that have continued to guide my career. I’m especially excited to now have the opportunity to grow as both a researcher and mentor.”

During her MPH and PhD studies, Cruz focused on rural health and health equity. “I came to see health as far more complex than it is often treated in public health and medicine—it is biological, social, historical, and political all at once. That broader understanding of health continues to shape how I approach both my research and my work with communities today.” ■