

A journey of persistence, passion and public health

By Kevin Bushaw, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Nalani Thomas, a doctoral graduate from Arizona State University's [College of Health Solutions](#), defended her dissertation and will graduate this May with a PhD in population health. Her path to this moment was not straightforward — she faced challenges adjusting to college, and at one point was advised to leave school altogether.

Instead, she persisted. Through exploration and redirection, she found her way into public health through community work and research focused on maternal and child health, ethics and policy.

Question: Can you tell me what shaped your focus?

Answer: In my undergraduate career, I wanted to work in health and with people. Initially, I pursued biology and nursing, but I ended up on academic probation and even had a career advisor tell me to drop out entirely.

That experience pushed me to reevaluate what I wanted and where I felt most aligned. I shifted my major to public health, and everything began to click.

I participated in a study abroad program focused on reproductive health in northern Europe, then became an intern at a nonprofit working with pregnant and parenting teens in Arizona. That experience led to a CDC-funded fellowship at the [Kennedy Krieger Institute's MCHC/RISE-UP program](#).

These experiences solidified my passion for public health, especially maternal and child health.

Q: What are you researching?

A: My dissertation focuses on perinatal mental health, public health ethics and legal epidemiology. I looked at how ethics and law intersect, especially how we balance individual autonomy with protecting population health.

Maternal health outcomes in the U.S. have been worsening, especially those related to mental health. My work explores the responsibility public health practitioners have to address these

disparities and how systems can change course in ways that are both effective and ethically grounded.

Q: If you had a magic wand to address one issue, what would you prioritize?

A: There's a quote in systems science: "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets."

With that in mind, I would prioritize investing in public health, social programs, providers and individuals because supporting individuals strengthens communities.

Research shows financial stress shapes everything: mental health, housing, education, access to health care and long-term health outcomes.

Many providers want to address mental health but don't feel equipped. There's often a disconnect between patient expectations and provider training, and improving those systems could help reduce health disparities and improve quality of life.

Q: What brought you to ASU and your doctoral journey?

A: When I was considering graduate school, I wanted to come back home to Arizona to be closer to family. ASU's online master's program gave me the flexibility to continue working full time in cancer research at Mayo Clinic while applying what I learned to my work. During that time, I also became one of the earliest members of the [Maternal and Child Health Translational Research Team](#) at the College of Health Solutions.

The support I received from the Graduate College and the College of Health Solutions defined my doctoral journey. I received the [Graduate College Enrichment Fellowship](#), [travel funding](#) for conferences and trainings, and later the [Graduate College Completion Fellowship](#). Those awards allowed me to focus on my research and grow as a future leader in my field.

Q: Who supported you along the way, and what does earning a doctorate mean to you?

A: My co-chairs, [Rizwana Biviji](#) and Dean [Michael Yudell](#), along with my committee, program leadership and classmates, were incredible supporters.

From a personal perspective, my husband has been my biggest support. We've been together since undergrad, so he's seen every stage of this journey — the uncertainty, growth and everything in between.

I've reflected a lot on what earning a PhD means to me as a first-generation American. My grandparents and parents immigrated to the U.S. from the Caribbean, and in only three generations, they get to see their granddaughter earn a doctorate. This accomplishment feels like a way to honor the sacrifices they made.

Q: What advice would you give to graduate students?

A: Make friends and have them join your writing group. I'm serious — community made all the difference for me. During my doctoral program, I was co-president of the Black Graduate Student Association and built relationships with students across disciplines. Our writing group became a space for accountability and support.

Every week, we showed up virtually, whether it was processing tough moments, celebrating progress or getting words on the page. I don't think I would have finished without them.

Q: What's next for you?

A: I accepted a postdoctoral position focused on policy related to the health and well-being of rural residents who are pregnant and their infants. I'll be working with a team whose research I cited throughout my dissertation, which is exciting.

This milestone still doesn't feel real. I'm taking it all in and recognize how much this journey has meant and the opportunities ahead.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Nalani Thomas, a doctoral graduate of Arizona State University's College of Health Solutions, researched perinatal mental health, public health ethics and maternal health policy while earning her PhD in population health. Courtesy photo