Kaitlin Ward never thought she would study social work, much less get accepted to the number one social work PhD program in the country.

Through her journey, Ward has developed the strong belief that social work will make the greatest impact on the world and change the most lives.

Finding her path

Growing up, Ward thought she knew all she needed to know about social work. Her mom was a social worker who owned her own practice and implemented her profession into her parenting. When she saw her mom’s life with the cases she worked with, however, Ward decided that she could never do what her mom did.

It wasn’t until the end of her undergraduate degree that Ward completely changed her mind.

“Towards the end of my undergrad...I remember seeing a lot of people (living through some pretty hard things),” Ward explains. “My mom always taught me growing up that if you work hard enough... good things will happen in life. But, I was looking at these people that were undergoing racial bias and were living in poverty and it almost seemed that, despite their best efforts, there were systemic road blocks
that prevented them from succeeding. I looked at them and I said that is not right. These discriminations and systemic boundaries should not exist.”

From there, Ward discovered that social work isn’t limited to therapy. Social work can be implementing policy changes and researching why injustices happen and what can be done to change them. Social work is figuring out why we have social issues and putting a stop to systemic boundaries.

Ward’s motivation and goal in pursuing this career is to remove barriers from individuals so that they can thrive and be who they want to be. She plans on doing this by helping families and men become more involved in preventing sexual abuse and child maltreatment.

Accepting opportunities

This past spring, Ward was accepted into the University of Michigan’s joint social work-developmental psychology program.

Ward claims that if it weren’t for the faculty, the resources, and the skills that she learned at BYU, she would not have gotten the opportunity to go to Michigan and do research to change lives.

When Ward was in the BYU social work program, she took advantage of every opportunity given her. She took advanced statistical modeling courses so that she could perform the math behind the theory, wrote a research methods course, and worked with five different professors on 13 different papers.

One of the papers Ward collaborated on concerned social support and male depression in Kazakhstan. The paper won her the university’s 3MT competition in 2017.

Giving opportunities

After having so many opportunities to progress in her own studies, Ward is ready to extend opportunities to others.

On the psychology side, she will study how father engagement and healthy family relationships impact childhood outcomes. On the social work side of her program, Ward will research what dads, fathers, and men in general can do to be a bigger part in the effort to eliminate child sexual abuse and maltreatment.

On the larger scale, Ward knows that by doing research and sharing information, she can help remove roadblocks in people’s lives, be an advocate for those who don’t know how to advocate for themselves, and improve the quality of life for thousands of families and their children.
“We need advocates for people who don’t have a voice, or who don’t get heard, or who are not seen. That is the biggest reason why we need social workers. A lot of times, there are injustices going on behind the scenes...and social workers are the first ones to pay attention and to do something about it,” shares Ward.

“People do great things and they do different things, but there are only so many people who are physically changing the world and people’s lives,” says Ward. As a social worker, Ward does the research and starts the actions to make this change.