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Spring 2012, Ghana Journey Inspires Nursing Students

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The UNH Center for International Education Newsletter

Spring 2012

GHANA JOURNEY INSPIRES NURSING STUDENTS

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Tribal elders welcomed Jennifer Lyon and her classmates in several villages where they provided much-needed medical supplies and health care assistance.

A class's tour of health clinics in rural West African villages provides insights that enlighten.

There's nothing out of the ordinary about a student sharing photos from a winter break trip with a few friends.

But when four university officials set aside their lunch hour to take a look, it's a safe bet that these are no ordinary photos and that this is no ordinary student.

"It was absolutely fascinating," says Anne Lawing, UNH dean of students, "because you're seeing her applying what she's learning here in such a different setting. She had such an amazing experience, and it was something we really wanted to see for ourselves."

But when word spread around the offices of Student and Academic Affairs where she works part-time, she soon had a request for a showing in the President's Conference Room.

More than 100 photos show Lyon and her classmates visiting health care clinics and schools across rural Ghana, observing and assisting local health practitioners, and learning about regional health care challenges.

One shows a boy, no older than five, walking along a dirt road balancing bundles of thatch on his head. Another shows Lyon sitting among tribal dignitaries as her class is welcomed at a remote village. Others find Lyon swarmed by village children, working with local nurses, and holding newborn babies.

As she narrated the photos from the 18-day trip, Lyon marveled at how Ghanaian health care providers deliver remarkably effective care with only the most basic tools and scant supplies. "I don't think we can even begin to appreciate how different health care is here in the U.S.," says Lyon, a UNH Honors Program student, sorting through hundreds of photos. "And having the opportunity to experience that first-hand was absolutely amazing. I loved every minute of it."



The UNH nursing class helped publicize the “Helping Babies Breathe” protocol, which teaches neonatal resuscitation techniques in resource-limited areas.

In addition to the demands of her senior year studies, Lyon works at Exeter Hospital about 12 hours a week as a licensed nursing assistant and up to 9 hours a week as an office assistant at UNH Student and Academic Services (SAS).

It was at SAS that she shared a few photos, which then sparked the presentation with Mark Rubinstein, vice president for SAS; Lawing, Karen Gilbert, Rubinstein's assistant; and Janet Cass, director of the UNH Parents Association.

Rubinstein said the insights Lyon shared are inspiring, both for other students and for university administrators whose work is devoted to promoting student achievement.

“Through Jen's education, I am sure that she had never lost sight of her reason for becoming a nurse or the essential elements of the relationship that exist between practitioner and patient,” he says. “But in Ghana, I have to think that the absence of high tech equipment and specialists means a different set of challenges for a nurse than it does in New Hampshire. In that setting, I have to think that the experience was one where you find absolute clarity about the value that you, as a nurse, bring to your patients when elaborate mechanisms for monitoring and layers of backup are not available.”

Gene Harkless, chair of the UNH nursing program, has been visiting Ghana since 2005, through a connection with Dr. Yaw Nsiah, professor of biology and public health at Eastern Connecticut State University. Nsiah runs a small, private nonprofit, Rural Health Project Africa, in Asamang, a village north of the city of Kumasi.

Last year, seven UNH students traveled to Ghana to pursue independent work with small clinics there. The program proved popular enough that it was offered as a January Term course this year. “I thought we might get eight students,” Harkless says. “But we totally filled up the program with 15 in a day.”

At Asamang, the UNH students stayed at Nsiah's home and worked with community health nurses at a child welfare clinic, in post-natal care, and with a family planning clinic. Then, traveling miles over rough dirt roads in a cramped bus, they traversed the countryside, stopping at rural clinics and staying with local hosts.

At Kwamang, a more remote village, they assisted a local nurse midwife and nurse—both of whom serve as primary health care providers.

“They have so few resources, so little equipment and so little money,” Lyon said of the local health care providers. “Yet, they're so successful and they do such great work without all the technology and resources we have here in the U.S. It really makes you think about all the resources we pour into health care here, and how much of that is absolutely necessary.”

Finally, at Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana, the students worked at a 1,000-bed teaching hospital with Dr. Martin Agyei,

who arranged for the students to observe a TB clinic, HIV clinic, and dermatology clinic. Traveling with the class were Shari Davis '08, who studied in Ghana under a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (she is now a graduate student in public health at Boston University), and Kerry Hasselbrack '09G, an adjunct faculty member in the UNH nursing program.

“Having the opportunity to combine my nursing training here with the experience in Ghana was incredible,” Lyon said.

The UNH students filled their suitcases with medical supplies—syringes, surgical gloves, stethoscopes, medical reference books, hats for newborn babies, and other items—to distribute throughout their trip. Several also brought along children's books and bags of candy, which found them swarmed by playful children in each village they visited.

They also brought materials to promote the “Helping Babies Breathe” program, which teaches neonatal resuscitation techniques in resource-limited areas, where newborn asphyxiation is a major cause of death.

Rubinstein recalls watching the slideshow and thinking about how the images of people, whether the smiling faces of children or adoring parents looking at their newborns, are universal reminders of the “sameness” of people around the world.

“Humanity should unify us,” Rubinstein says. “However, the contrasts of our circumstances—particularly in the context of Jen's experience in medical clinics—were stark”

Yet, Rubinstein also finds hopeful inspiration in the students' experience.

“While we talk about the global economy and technology bringing all of us closer together, there is no perfect substitute for a passport and the opportunity to put it to good use.”

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