Jefferson Students “Bridge the Gaps”
This Summer in Philadelphia

This summer, two Jefferson School of Population Health Master of Public Health (MPH) students, Elizabeth de Armas and Jeffrey E. Hicks, had the opportunity to take part in Bridging the Gaps (BTG), a 7-week interdisciplinary federal work study program that allows students training in various health and social services fields to collaborate and work with vulnerable populations in underserved areas. Since 1991, BTG student interns representing Philadelphia’s health science universities and programs at Drexel University, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, Temple University, Thomas Jefferson University, University of Pennsylvania, University of the Sciences, Bryn Mawr College and LaSalle University have been paired up with non-profit community organizations located across the Philadelphia region.

Students come to BTG from various academic disciplines including medicine, nursing, dentistry, public health, social work, occupational therapy, physical therapy, pharmacy, law, and physician assistant. During the 7-week program, students worked on health-related projects located at their respective sites 4 days of the week. On Wednesdays, the student interns (roughly 200 in total) met at one of the various Philadelphia universities to discuss the progress being made by the students at their community work sites and to learn from experts in the field who routinely work with underserved populations. Each year, as part of the BTG’s curriculum, a book is chosen which highlights a particular health concern that student interns will encounter during their summer experience. This year we read David Sheff’s book, Beautiful Boy, which discusses the heartache felt by David’s family in dealing with his son Nic’s addiction to methamphetamine. The program concludes with a symposium held in September that showcases all of the student interns’ summer projects.

ELIZABETH’S EXPERIENCE

As part of my BTG experience, I worked at the Philadelphia Senior Center Main Branch. The Services on Site program of the Philadelphia Senior Center’s Independence Promotion Project provides social service support to seniors living in geriatric residential facilities. The community sites include Anthony Wayne Senior Housing, Scottish Rite Tower, Scottish Rite House and 801 Locust Senior Housing. Philadelphia Senior Center (PSC) Main Branch, located in Center City, provides recreation, group meals, health and wellness education, and other supportive services each year for more than 5,000 adults aged 55 and older. The Center offers a variety of activities including art classes, poetry workshops, line dancing, tai chi, drama, walking clubs, a chorus and health support groups. Throughout the 7-week program, I worked on several health and wellness projects at PSC and at its affiliated independent senior residential facilities. At the residential facilities, the student intern team – comprised of a public health, medical, and social work student – collaborated with the Social Services Coordinator to provide weekly presentations and take-home handouts covering a wide array of topics such as mental health, memory, sleep, depression, heat safety, nutrition, heart health and oral health.

At PSC, we also organized and oversaw the distribution of food vouchers for the Pennsylvania Farmers Market Nutrition Program. Additionally, we organized and distributed 200 fans for the annual fan fair, which provided box fans to seniors.

As a public health student, I was initially interested in the Bridging the Gaps summer internship program because I wanted an opportunity to work with a community organization that assists vulnerable populations. I figured that having an internship in the field of community health would be a great way for me to get some exposure to a certain aspect of my field. When I was assigned to the elderly population, I was both excited and nervous. I wanted to see how “in tune” they were with their health, what they did on a daily basis, the struggles they faced, the struggles they overcame, and their social dynamic. I realized during my time at the senior center that many of the elder adults come to the center because they are lonely or need something to do. Sometimes just smiling at them and taking five minutes to ask how they were doing would make their day. Little things, more often than not, mean the most. This experience has allowed me to realize how important it is to care for the aging population and ensure...
they are helped and assisted with the daily struggles they face. Many of the seniors at PSC were very open to sharing parts of their life and it allowed me to understand them on a deeper level. It is nice to know that many of our elder adult population continue to have a good overall quality of life and well-being. At the same time, it is frightening to know that so many of them continuously fall through the cracks and don’t receive the care they truly need. These are the experiences that I will remember throughout my career and the experiences that have made me want to do more for this population.

JEFF’S EXPERIENCE

As part of my BTG experience, I worked at Mercy Neighborhood Ministries of Philadelphia, Inc., located in the Nicetown-Tioga section of northern Philadelphia. Mercy is a faith-based community center that “creates partnerships and services with those who are poor in the North Philadelphia community.” Since January 2009, Mercy has provided services such as childcare (before and after school programs, summer camp, etc.) to children from Pre-K through 12th grade. Mercy is licensed to serve about 110 school-aged children. Additionally, they provide an adult daycare program for adults who are unable to perform daily self-care activities independently, and for those who desire companionship. The center is licensed to serve up to 57 seniors. On Mondays, my student partner and I worked at Mercy’s summer day camp. My experience with the children included teaching health lessons on topics such as oral health, cardiovascular health, and nutrition. I also assisted Mercy’s classroom teachers with supervising summer camp activities. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, my student partner and I worked at Mercy’s adult daycare program. My experience with the adults included teaching health lessons focused on cardiovascular health, medications, and diabetes; assisting with breakfast, lunch, and snack; engaging in daily exercise activities; discussing current events; participating in arts and craft projects; and socializing with the seniors to gain an insight into their personal stories.

It was an enriching opportunity to work with both the young and the aged in an underserved section of Philadelphia. My time at Mercy gave me the ability to apply public health lessons that I have learned at Thomas Jefferson University and present them in a real-world community setting. The best part of the 7-week BTG program was that not only did the children and seniors at Mercy learn about healthcare from me, but I learned a lot about them, too. From day one, Mercy welcomed me and my BTG partner into their facility and made us feel like we were long-time family members. I will always cherish my BTG experience and fondly remember the memories made at Mercy.

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