

UConn health center

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**Learning
Through
Service**

LEARNING THRO

AS MEDICAL STUDENTS AT THE Health Center, Christine Skurkis and Sarah Schlegel realized they shared two rather unique interests: a love of sign language and a deep desire to help children with special health care needs. So they joined forces and created a new health and wellness program for youngsters with hearing loss at the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Conn.



"The curriculum we developed for ASD students covers eight different topics, ranging from peer pressure to sexually transmitted diseases," says Schlegel. "Developing it was probably the most eye-opening experience I had in medical school. It was extremely challenging, yet rewarding."

It was challenging because English is a second language to most deaf children; their main communication is via sign language. Many English words don't translate into sign language, so reading and understanding more complicated medical materials can be difficult.

"Hearing children are exposed to health and medical issues from so many different sources," says Skurkis.

CHRISTINE SKURKIS AND SARAH SCHLEGEL, MIDDLE, CHAT INFORMALLY WITH ASD STUDENTS, LEFT TO RIGHT, DEQUAN THOMAS, KANGNI HE, MARIA DADARIO AND RODERICK BLACKWELL.



OUGH SERVICE



Community-based education helps medical students become knowledgeable about the patients they will ultimately serve.

By Carolyn Pennington



"But deaf children may only learn it in school, and most go into the classroom with a lot of misconceptions or incorrect information."

Setting the record straight was only one hurdle the women had to tackle. Learning how to effectively teach deaf children was another. Skurkis and Schlegel soon learned that repetition and visual aids were key to getting their message across.

"When hearing children are listening to a teacher and look down to take notes, they can still hear the teacher talking. When deaf children take their eyes off the teacher, all communication ends," explains Skurkis. "When they look back, the teacher may be onto another topic. That's why repetition and actually drawing pictures on the board are so helpful."

MAKING THE EXTRA EFFORT

The women weren't fluent in sign language, so ASD provided a translator and offered Skurkis and Schlegel free sign language classes. The extra effort the women put into learning their students' language really helped them bond with them.

"It was an excellent program, and our students were immediately taken with Chris and Sarah's enthusiastic approach to life skills that would serve them well with their future medical needs, and overall awareness of health and wellness issues," says Kathleen Jenkelunas with ASD. "With the program, our students are more apt to approach medical treatment with optimism, knowing they can communicate their needs on a meaningful level."

Stacey Brown, associate director of community-based education at the medical school, initially helped Schlegel and Skurkis get the program



STACEY BROWN, LEFT,
AND JUDY LEWIS.

up and running, and now guides other medical students who are interested in volunteering for the ASD project.

"To volunteer for ASD, the students need to feel comfortable teaching with a translator or they need to take the time to learn sign language," says Brown. "The ones who volunteer are passionate and committed."

STRATEGIES FOR A SILENT WORLD

Maureen Pons is one of those committed students. Like Skurkis and Schlegel, Pons shares an interest in American Sign Language. "I realize that people who live in a world without sound are probably quite vulnerable in terms of knowledge about health and access to health care," says Pons. She's been volunteering at ASD for the last couple of years and is currently using her independent project to add an important element to the curriculum. "The goal of my project is to determine how comfortable the students are with going to the doctor, and how important they think it is to know and share their health history. I will try to give them some strategies to make their visit to the doctor's office a little less frightening," explains Pons.

"Community service is not a new concept for our students," says Judy Lewis, director of community-based education at the medical school. "We've found that nearly 80 percent of incoming medical students have volunteered while in high school or college."

The medical school's formal community-based education

program started in 1990 when a group of students decided to help the homeless in Hartford, Conn. They opened a medical and dental clinic at the South Park Inn, a city shelter, and it became the school's first community service project.

As it became clear that other students would benefit from volunteer work, 15 hours of community service became a graduation requirement. "We were well ahead of the curve," says Lewis. "UConn was one of the first medical schools to require a certain number of hours of community service by students in order to graduate."

Now the Health Center's community-based education curriculum contains more than a dozen programs, including the Migrant Farm Workers Health Clinic, the YMCA Adolescent Clinic, Science Mentoring Program, Habitat for Humanity and a health education program for Hartford middle school students. Nearly 300 local and state agencies across Connecticut benefit from the students' work.

The South Park Inn Clinic still draws the most volunteers working the greatest number of hours. For instance, students in the class of 2003 spent more than 2,000 hours volunteering at South Park during their four years of medical school.

MAKING BETTER DOCTORS

The goal, in the end, is to make the students better doctors. "I think it gives them a better understanding of the difficulties some people face. Physicians need to be knowledgeable about

the communities in which they practice, and the best way to learn that is through personal involvement," says Lewis. "And we certainly hope they continue their good works when they leave school."

at Yale, has formed a nonprofit group that regularly supplies ASD with donated books. They would like to join forces again to do specialty health workshops for the ASD students on an intermittent basis.



STUDENTS PROVIDE MEDICAL SCREENINGS AND INFORMATION DURING HEALTH FAIRS AT THE OLD STATE HOUSE IN HARTFORD, CONN., TOP; AND AT A FARM IN THE CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY, ABOVE.

Skurkis and Schlegel certainly have. They are thrilled that the program they started is now one of the core projects medical students can choose when fulfilling their community service requirement. Skurkis, who is now chief pediatric resident at Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford, Conn., makes sure the program continues by aiding in the recruitment of current medical students for the program. Schlegel, who is doing a fellowship in pediatrics

"I feel we have a strong connection to them," says Schlegel. "We related to them above and beyond our assignment."

"We found a project that was really interesting to us; it wasn't something we felt we were forced to do," says Skurkis. "We learned to make it part of our lives, which I believe is the goal of the community service requirement." —