

# Rally for America's Health

by Diana Westgate Armstrong

**R**ousing music from Sousa and Springsteen filled the air above the West Lawn of the Capitol on March 13, 1998 as *Youth for America's Health! (yah!)* began its historic mission to unite American youth around the issue of solving our nation's health-care crisis. Bound by the universal principle that **Every person has the right to health care, yah!** planned its *Rally for America's Health* and lobbying day to bring attention to the current crisis of the medically uninsured.

*yah!* was formed by the American Medical Student Association (AMSA), the nation's largest and oldest independent medical student organization that represents nearly 30,000 physicians-in-training. AMSA's *yah!* also represents a coalition of concerned individuals and organizations dedicated to ensuring that all people achieve their right to health care. The coalition promises to forward this goal by promoting education and activism designed to increase the quality and accessibility of health care.

Quotes from the organization's primer/brochure take the following stands:

"It is time for the United States to recognize health care as a human right. The American Medical Student Association, in forming *Youth for America's Health! (yah!)*, is taking the first bold step toward addressing our country's health care injustices. Please join us."

"The United States must recognize Universal Health Coverage as a basic human right and amend the Constitution accordingly — for this is not merely the will of the American people, but more significantly, an innate human right."

Primer and rally flyer references to statistical findings on America's uninsured include the following:

- "44.8 million Americans were uninsured for the full six months between January and June, 1996." *That's about one out of every five Americans.*
- "87% of the uninsured reside in a household with a working adult." *It could be a parent or a relative.*
- "11 million were children." *It could be you.*
- "More than 17% of Americans lack any form of health insurance according to the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey in 1996."

AMSA's *Rally for America's Health* was held in conjunction with its 48th National Convention in Washington, D.C. Approximately 250 medical students, representing 70 medical schools, participated in the event which called on Congress to provide access to health care for every American. Rally organizers and speakers urged all participants to increase awareness of the medically uninsured by supporting the following AMSA Amendment which calls on Congress to enact universal health care coverage by March 13, 2008:

...they all urged getting involved politically on the community and national levels.

## THE AMSA AMENDMENT:

**Section 1.** Health care is an essential safeguard of human life and dignity, and there is an obligation for the federal government of the United States of America to ensure that every citizen is able to realize this fundamental right. On or before March 13, 2008, the United States Congress by law shall enact a plan for universal health-care coverage that permits every citizen of the United State of America to obtain health care on a regular basis.

**Section 2.** The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

*"Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."* — Martin Luther King

*"The threat of illness and the absence of guaranteed health care shackle us, deny us the liberty to pursue our dreams or threaten our right to life. Neither we nor our parents or children can receive the right to happiness while we live in fear of the absence of a basic right to health care, should we or those we love fall ill."* — American Medical Student Association

Speakers during the two hour rally included Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN),

Representative Bernard Sanders (I-VT), Dr. Douglas Robins (co-chair of the DC Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP), Jennifer Jones (co-founder of Students Together Ending Poverty (STEP), Kavita Pate (National President, AMSA), and Robert Chisholm (Legislative Affairs Director, AMSA). In speaking to these future physicians and their coalition, they all urged getting involved politically on the community and national levels. This involvement would prove to be the most influential in changing policy for securing humane, affordable and accessible health care, they stressed.

As the rally ended, the students organized into regional lobbying teams and set out with bright AMSA posters and a plan to spend the rest of the day visiting congressional offices. Rally facts sheets urged lobbying and support for the following pending federal legislation and for AMSA's 1997-1998 National Project, *Stamp Out Smoking*.

- **Patients' Rights:** *Health Insurance Bill of Rights Act of 1997 (H.R. 820); Managed Care Consumer Protection Act of 1997 (H.R.337).*

- **Access to Care:** *National Health Service Corps Scholarship Program Incentive Act (S. 1286); National Health Service Corps Scholarship Program (H.R.2998); National Health Service Corps Scholarship Program Incentive Act (H.R.2951).*

- **Diverse Physician Workforce:** (oppose H.R.1909,S.950) and support *Racial and Gender Preference Reform Act (H.R.2079)* as an alternative if affirmative action is ended completely.

- **Tobacco and Smoking Issues:** *Stamp Out Smoking* will mobilize medical students to tackle the multifaceted aspects of smoking and tobacco use in this country. Each AMSA chapter will work to reduce smoking and tobacco-related deaths in their communities and will work to change governmental policy.

Diana Westgate Armstrong will graduate from the Health Advocacy Program in December, 1998. This summer she will spend six weeks as a fellow in the Government Affairs Office of The March of Dimes in Washington, D.C.