

A First Year Student's Perspective

by Donna Gentry

There are many reasons why people come to the Health Advocacy program at Sarah Lawrence College; everybody here has his or her own story. I believe that part of the strength and beauty of the program is how everybody's story is important and how everybody's story grows and changes throughout their time here.

When I entered the Health Advocacy program a year ago, I came with some concrete reasons but also with some rather vague ideas about how those reasons would become reality. I had been laid off from my job of ten years (not in the health care field) and knew I needed more education in order to obtain a better, more interesting job. I also knew that the health care system was complicated and difficult to maneuver and wanted, somehow, to make it easier for people. The Health Advocacy program seemed to fit both my needs and my interests. I had no idea what awaited me that first year.

It had been years since I had been in school and the academic setting was quite intimidating, yet the challenge was

exciting and stimulating. In each class, I tried to grasp the basic ideas of the theoretical approach and apply those ideas to what I knew of the world. Yet through the first year, I was almost overwhelmed by the amount of work and studying required. The pace was fast, with each week building on the previous week's work. Struggling to keep up and somehow filter all the readings and discussions into a meaningful and understandable statement was horrendously difficult in some cases. Anybody who's written weekly worksheets knows what I mean! I often found it difficult to keep track of the ideas and reasons that had driven me back to school.

I was distressed at the end of the first semester. As I look back, it was probably the most difficult four months I've had—academically, financially and emotionally. I was stressed, tired, ill, and unsure of myself when December came around and was simply glad to have a break. I felt a lack of cohesiveness in my studies and had no real feeling that I'd done what was expected of me in the semester.

In the spring, some of the confusion remained. While I felt I had accomplished quite a lot just by making it

through the fall, I still had some problems with expectations; my teachers' expectations of me, my expectations of class, and my expectations of how the classes would intersect to create a cohesive program.

I believe that in the future, more discussions with professors might be helpful, so that students don't feel so much at sea. I felt, and I believe that several of my classmates did as well, that while graduate school is supposed to be challenging, in several cases we weren't given quite as much guidance as we would have liked or appreciated. I'm sure that some of that is my fault; I didn't ask for much. In at least one instance, meetings didn't help; I remained confused. It's difficult to provide appropriate structure in an environment like Sarah Lawrence, where so much of the learning is self-directed; but when a student isn't focused on anything in particular, self-direction looks a lot like desperate flailing.

At the end of the first year, I was thrilled that I had made it through, and done well, but my original motivation seemed to have been lost in a hazy mist of academia. I still wasn't sure what a health advocate did in the real world. I needed to somehow connect the theory to practice. The turning point, for me, was the experience of my first internship.

I was unsure of what I wanted to accomplish with an internship. Truthfully, I just wanted to do one, to get it over with, but I did want it to be a meaningful experience. I didn't want to waste the opportunity of having real world experience in the health care field. I chose to work with a community collaborative that focused on childhood issues: the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI). It's a group in Yonkers that is comprised of community-based organizations focused on children—the library system, local hospitals, social service groups and city organizations, etc. This group comes together with a mission and vision that each child in Yonkers will be born healthy, be nurtured, be in a supportive family and community and enter school ready to learn. Each member of the group has its own activities, but also as a group the Initiative runs its own projects. One of them is their recently published *Data Book* (see page 16), which is the first publication in Yonkers to

EXCITING NEW FELLOWSHIP ANNOUNCED

Porrath to Fund Cancer Patient Advocate

We are pleased to announce an exciting new fellowship in cancer patient advocacy, to be funded by The Porrath Foundation for Patient Advocacy (PFPA) in Beverly Hills, CA. The fellowship will be awarded annually to a Sarah Lawrence College Health Advocacy graduate student interested in a career in cancer advocacy.

The express purpose of The Porrath Fellowship for Patient Advocacy is to train the student to become a cancer patient advocate and deliver advocacy services to individual patients and their caregivers. The \$10,000 in fellowship support will enable a student interested in direct cancer advocacy to take advantage of a learning experience that is not a paid internship and that s/he might otherwise have to forgo for financial reasons. The fellowship recipient will be selected by a committee of HAP faculty, alumnae/i, and a professional cancer ad-

vocate, with the participation of an active member of the Foundation.

The PFPA calls itself a "voice for personal advocacy services for cancer patients and caregivers" and aims to enable cancer patients to understand the information and options presented to them, participate proactively in the process, and make effective choices and medical decisions.

PFPA was founded by Saar A. Porrath, M.D. and his wife, Toni Bernay, Ph.D, a psychologist. Dr. Porrath was an internationally renowned breast oncologist, radiation therapist, consultant, author and speaker. He also became a patient when he was diagnosed with cancer (plasma cell leukemia). His personal experiences during his last two years of life were the catalyst for this project.

For more information about the Porrath Fellowship, email Marsha Hurst at mhurst@slc.edu.

A First Year Student's Perspective

Continued from page 14

gather city data in one place: health information, school statistics, child care slots, library programs, crime data, neighborhood information, as well as information about strengthening families and nurturing children. The ECI also hosts a Family Day each November, a day full of activities and fun and devoted to the appreciation of families.

My mentor during this internship was Rachel Grob, a graduate of this program as well as an instructor here, and she understands the direction an intern needs in order to have a meaningful experience. I've been to meetings where my input has been appreciated. I was involved in substantive ways with both the *Data Book* and Family Day. I did some minor editing and proofreading and helped choose pictures for the *Data Book*. Most of all I've sat back and watched and learned how a community collaborative functions in order to remain true to its stated vision and reach its goals. It's been an interesting study of cooperation between community groups and how the groups maintain and foster a relationship with a political power structure that doesn't always agree with and/or support their efforts.

The most meaningful part of this internship has been my involvement in a project focused on utilization of medical homes for children in Yonkers. This project arose from the wish of the ECI to have pediatricians involved with the ECI, and the idea of medical homes seemed appropriate. A "medical home," as defined by the American Academy of Pediatrics, is medical care that is "accessible, family centered, continuous, comprehensive, coordinated, compassionate and culturally competent." The hypothesis was that there was an underutilization of medical homes for children in Yonkers, but data was needed to either support or refute that hypothesis. So the project has begun by gathering and analyzing data on emergency room visits of children aged 0-5 in the three hospitals in Yonkers. The hope is to use the data as a starting point for an educational model to help teach people how important it is to choose a pediatrician for their children and why it's important to use the pediatrician instead of the emergency room. I wrote letters requesting information and designed forms to gather the information,

and took some beginning steps toward creating a program. And as suddenly as that, I became involved in something that has the potential to affect people in a systemic and meaningful way.

Whether this project finds funding and really has an impact is yet to be seen. Yet the importance of the project to me seems to go to the heart of my educational experience at Sarah Lawrence. I came with the idea of some sort of direct service, helping people one on one. Creating policy or a program that could help people in a larger way seemed beyond me and my abilities. To me, policy makers were "those people." I didn't know who those people were, but they certainly weren't people like me. I'm intelligent and I care about people, but I couldn't see myself as a creator or an analyzer of policy or programs. I realized, by virtue of the real-world experience of this internship, that not only could I help people one on one, but I could help in a larger, more policy-oriented way, by becoming one of "those people."

My classes and training in the program had created an awareness of both the importance of creating policy and the effect of a policy's impact on people. This program is in the unusual position of being concerned with both. My internship put those academic theories into the practical world and helped me learn to apply them effectively. I realized that the

avenue I want to pursue will somehow have to include health policy and patient education.

Somehow, through that mist of readings, worksheets, research papers, class discussions and peer discussions, I had changed not my abilities, but my perception of my abilities. My confidence grew and that growth altered my ideas about my future.

I would probably have achieved some of the same self-awareness and growth in any good graduate program, but I'm not sure I would have discovered the focus I now have. And I'm not sure if another program would have cared about my personal growth as long as I paid my tuition. I do know if I had chosen differently, the weekly worksheet stress would have been avoided! In any case, come this spring, I'll graduate (hopefully!) I'll have to go back to the real world and find a spot for myself, one that I hope will take advantage of the skills I've acquired and the abilities I've nurtured here. I think my time here was well spent. ■

Donna Gentry graduated the University of Texas at Arlington and will receive her M.A. in health advocacy from SLC this September. Donna is looking forward to jump-starting her lapsed exercise program, preparing for another graduation (her son's, from kindergarten), and eventually to joining the workforce.

HAP IN CUBA IN 2002

A group of health advocacy students, faculty and alumni/ae are planning a one-week trip to Cuba, January 5-13, 2002. The goal of the trip is to learn about health care in Cuba. HAP student Cathey Bienkowski has been to Cuba with a former Peace Corps volunteer group interested in health care and is helping to plan this exciting trip.

Sarah Lawrence College has an undergraduate student program in affiliation with the University of Havana, and this year there are SLC undergraduates studying in Havana for the first time. The HAP trip will be a more professional learning experience, but we are benefiting from the relationship already developed between the University of Havana

and SLC. We will be working through an organization called MEDICC that has planned and arranged educational trips for other health professionals in the US.

Participants will be housed in the graduate dorms of the National School of Public Health in Havana. Fulltime translators will be on hand to facilitate visits to hospitals, nursing homes, domestic violence and substance abuse programs, an AIDS sanitarium, a maternity clinic, a mental health facility, and various alternative medicine and primary care sites.

To check whether it is still possible to join this trip, email Marsha Hurst at mhurst@slc.edu.