

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

MEDICAL STUDENT ALYSSA PURDY HAS MADE GLOBAL HEALTH A FOCAL POINT OF HER MEDICAL EDUCATION.

Every Tuesday, a medical team from Upstate Medical University conducts COVID-19 screenings for new Americans and refugees resettling in Syracuse. For medical students like Alyssa Purdy '22, volunteering to assist newly resettled refugees provides a global health experience in her own backyard.

"If the pandemic has shown us anything, it's that the health of the world is so much more interconnected these days, with COVID variants spreading from one country to another through international travel," she says.

The screening is a joint venture between Upstate's Refugee Health Clinic and the Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement team and is run at the CYO on Syracuse's northside, the area where most new Americans settle. Run by Andrea Shaw, MD '09, assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics, the clinic provides care for refugee families from sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East—most recently a large influx of patients fleeing the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

This community-clinic partnership offers COVID testing free of charge to refugee families in the Syracuse area. Purdy leads this project, organizing a team of Upstate volunteers and coordinating testing translation and contact tracing support with the help of the Catholic Charities health navigator team, made up of new Americans speaking more than 25 languages collectively. "Most of the newly arriving Afghan refugees had COVID tests shortly before they arrived, but they have to get another test before they can integrate into the community and start to go to their doctor's appointments and things like that," she says. "And families know that if their child has been sent home from school with the sniffles, they can come and get a

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—Alyssa Purdy '22



Andrea Shaw, MD '09, and fourth-year medical student Alyssa Purdy at the Northside CYO

COVID test on Tuesday so that they can get cleared to go back to school."

Another bonus is that testing is done via saliva swab. "The kids don't have to be traumatized by getting another nasal pharyngeal swab," she says. "It's just like brushing your teeth."

Purdy believes the COVID testing is an important service for these refugee families, most of whom do not speak English and communicate through translation

support at the refugee center. "It would be very difficult for this population to get to one of the downtown clinics or out to the fairgrounds and they would have no means to communicate," she says.

Finding global health experiences has been a focal point for Purdy, even before beginning medical study at Upstate. After receiving her acceptance, Purdy deferred medical school for a year and spent six months volunteering in Ghana, Africa, with Unite for Sight, an organization that sponsors ophthalmologists to provide eye care. "I had never studied abroad in college, and this was an opportunity to immerse myself in another culture and have an international health-care experience," she says.

Teams of volunteers traveled to churches, schools, and community centers to conduct eye exams, seeing anywhere from 50 to 200 patients in a day. Purdy assisted with the refraction, and distributing eyeglasses and medications based on the providers' prescriptions.

"The local Ghanaian ophthalmologists were very passionate about providing quality care for their patients, but resources and funds were a limiting factor," she says. "It was amazing to see children receive a pair of glasses so that they could read the board or books at school. Because I wear glasses, I know I wouldn't have done well without them."

As a new medical student, Purdy attended the club fair and met Christina Lupone, MPH '13, director of the Center for Education and Training in the Upstate Institute for Global Health and Translational Science. "I was amazed by the global health opportunities that Upstate has established for students who are interested," she says.

Purdy joined Students for Global Health, and working with Lupone and Dr. Shaw, put together a proposal to conduct



At the Refugee Clinic held at the Northside CYO, Dr. Shaw and Purdy discuss health concerns with patients.

research in conjunction with the Institute of Global Health's program in Kisumu, Kenya. With funding from the College of Medicine Summer Research Fellowship program, Purdy spent two months in summer 2019 in Kenya. Part of her time was spent shadowing Kenyan medical students and attendings at the Obama Children's Hospital, where she was exposed to pathologies unusual in the United States, such as malaria, rickets, and Burkitt's lymphoma. She also spent time with Shaw conducting research at community health sites.

Purdy's own project focused on diabetes, which she says is an overlooked condition in the global health setting, where the focus tends to be on infectious disease. "I had a really well-rounded experience seeing academic medicine in Kenya as well as more rural community health care, which exposed me to different avenues for doing clinical work abroad," she says.

Purdy presented her project in November 2019 at the American Society for Tropical Medicine conference. At the time she expected she would be returning to Kenya during medical school. When

the COVID-19 pandemic prevented international travel, Purdy turned her focus locally.

In addition to volunteering at the refugee clinic, Purdy was tapped to serve on the planning board for a virtual international conference for health science trainees in the United States, Libya, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), funded through the Stevens Institute.

"Bridging Cultures to Defeat COVID-19" was a two-part conference, with programming held over two weeks in late fall 2021 and again in late winter 2022, attracting more than 250 participants.

Purdy was recruited to the project by Lupone, co-principal investigator on the grant with Seth Perry, PhD, associate professor of psychiatry, neuroscience and physiology, neurosurgery, and public health. "Alyssa is a highly motivated and an enthusiastic student who understands what we're trying to do in the field of global health in terms of reducing health inequities, understanding cultural competence, and finding ways to connect people different from ourselves to tackle some of these health problems and diseases," she says.

Purdy worked with Lupone and other medical students on networking components of the conference, creating virtual conference platforms so that students and practitioners from the three participating countries could interact. "People from different countries were able to share their experiences," says Purdy. "Although COVID exposed some of the structural issues in healthcare in the United States, it was particularly interesting to hear about the challenges in Libya, where the country has been destabilized so long due to civil war. It opened my eyes to a part of the world that I hadn't interacted with."

As a fourth-year student, Purdy began working as a runner in the Upstate Emergency Department, restocking supplies and helping triage patients. With the advent of the Omicron variant this winter, the emergency rooms filled up with COVID patients and ambulance stretchers lined both sides of the waiting area. "It felt overwhelming, but at the same time, I'd seen crowded hospitals in Kenya, so it wasn't entirely new."

In July, Purdy will begin a combined medicine/pediatrics residency at Baystate Medical Center, preparing her to be a well-rounded provider in a global health setting. And that doesn't necessarily mean traveling to a remote setting abroad.

"I haven't decided if I want to work in an in-patient or out-patient setting professionally or what I might do on an international level, but I definitely want to continue some component of refugee work in the United States," she says. "Global health is practiced just as much locally as it is internationally." ■