Public Health Studies in Cape Town, South Africa (RSA)

From June 3rd – July 21st, 2013, 14 JHU undergraduate students participated in the third annual Public Health Studies Program Abroad in Cape Town, South Africa – a partnership between JHU and the University of Cape Town (UCT), as well as five local non-governmental organizations.

The students received 3 graded credits for an ‘S’ distribution course taught by Anna Grimsrud of UCT, as well as 3 graded credits for a community-based learning (CBL) course lead by Dr. Jim Goodyear, Associate Director of the JHU Public Health Studies Program, and with the assistance of Ms. Angela Mias, an experienced CBL liaison.

Prior to departure, the students participated in orientation sessions with Dr. Goodyear and Dr. Lori Citti, the Director of Study Abroad, covering logistics of the program, travel medicine and safety issues (with additional support from Dr. Noreen Hynes, the Director of JHMI Travel Medicine), cross-cultural considerations, and a reading assignment and related discussion.

They left for RSA on June 3rd traveling to Johannesburg where they spent two days in Soweto township, visiting the Apartheid Museum, the Hector Pieterson Museum, Mandela’s House, and doing a bike tour of the larger township. The bike tour is very popular, and also offers a great introduction to some of South Africa’s most compelling recent history as well as to daily life in the townships.

Upon arrival in Cape Town, orientation continued for two additional days including sessions on working in the communities, South African economics, health and safety, and introductions to the site supervisors from the five CBL sites. Ms. Grimsrud did an introduction of the content and the format of her course, and the group finished with a tour of the City Bowl area – orienting them to Cape Town outside of the University: downtown and some of the historic landmarks.

June 10th was the first day of the students’ time at their CBL sites, and from there they attended Ms. Grimsrud’s course on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and went ‘to work’ at their community site on M/W/F for a total of 6 weeks.

Ms. Grimsrud’s Course

Ms. Grimsrud’s background is specifically in infectious disease epidemiology, so her overview of Public Health in South Africa was very much through the lens of HIV/AIDS. Since some of the students had had no public health coursework to date, she began with introductory concepts, and moved the students quickly to more involved content such as the controversies surrounding HIV policy, the perception of HIV+ residents of South Africa, the role of stigma in testing and treatment, and prominent advocacy that has occurred historically. She supplemented with a strong series of guest speakers to support any areas outside of her immediate expertise. These included the former Director of Research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a UCT Political Science professor, and research personnel from the Desmond Tutu Foundation to discuss field work and research ethics.
CBL Course

This aspect of the students’ learning was designed to complement their in-class work with Ms. Grimsrud. Through the contributions of their own work and their counterparts’, students gained firsthand understanding of the challenges of health care delivery and health promotion in an under-resourced environment. Students participated in a weekly seminar that included readings and reflection sessions linking their personal experience to the larger concepts.

The ideal CBL relationship emphasizes mutuality, and provides the opportunity for students to both learn and have something to contribute. The five sites where the students were placed this year were:

- SONKE Gender Justice: NGO working on HIV prevention largely through programming with men. Our students did extensive policy research to compare South Africa’s existing legislation with other Sub-Saharan countries to inform national level policy recommendations to benefit strategic health planning. [http://www.genderjustice.org.za/](http://www.genderjustice.org.za/)
- St. Joseph’s Home: a residential health care facility for chronically ill children where our students performed a time-motion study to determine if personnel are successfully meeting the many and complex needs of its patients. [http://www.stjosephshome.org.za/history.php](http://www.stjosephshome.org.za/history.php)
- Yabonga: an NGO dedicated to minimizing the impact of the HIV epidemic on women and their families. Here two students worked with grade 9 students on life skills – helping them articulate their individual goals, and giving them the tools to handle the many pitfalls to their success that may present themselves along the way. [http://www.yabonga.com/index.php?id=14](http://www.yabonga.com/index.php?id=14)
- Community Media Trust: a not-for-profit media production company which produced educational series in the fields of health, HIV/AIDS, education, gender-based violence, and other topics of Human Rights and social development since 1998. Here, two students produced a comprehensive and media-savvy profile of the NGO, which is now being widely circulated in that organization’s search for additional funding. [http://www.cmt.org.za/](http://www.cmt.org.za/)
- Ons Plek, a grass roots NGO that supports girls who are living on the streets by providing shelter, remedial education and social structure. There is also an after school program for children under twelve who live in the township. JHU students were involved in workshops on health issues from nutrition to HIV awareness, and played a key role in organizing administrative resources at the organization’s main headquarters.

Excursions

As part of the program, the students participated in a walking tour of the Bo-Kaap district of Cape Town and the Slave Lodge, a full-day trip down the Cape Point, a tour of Parliament to complement the Political Science content, and a trip to Robben Island. After a visit to the District 6 Museum, which describes one of the most notorious forced relocations of the Apartheid era, one weekend was spent in a homestay in Langa, one of Cape Town’s oldest townships. Ms. Mias has long-standing connections there and more than one student commented that this was the highlight of the entire program for them.

The students kept a blog during the program, please refer to: [http://www.jhucapetown.blogspot.com/](http://www.jhucapetown.blogspot.com/)

In general, the students were very curious, adaptable, and the size of the group facilitated discussion and shared experience. There was wonderful support and camaraderie among them. We had no security issues, and all students reported feeling safe and well cared for, and gave all instructors and components of the program very high marks. We are looking forward to 2014!