

# student profiles

## For Former Pro Soccer Player, Future Kicks Will Promote Health Among African Girls

WHEN SHE WAS 15, **MYRALYN "MIMI" NARTEY** ventured far from her family's home in Arizona to the Republic of Ghana, where her father had been raised, to play professional soccer for the Ghanaian women's national team. While there, she contracted malaria. At first the team administrators and medical staff failed to appreciate the magnitude of her illness. When Nartey began to deteriorate, she was taken to the nearest hospital, which she barely recognized as a medical care facility. "It felt more like an open-air marketplace," she recalls. As she waited a seemingly interminable period to be seen, Nartey saw frightened-looking women with sick babies on their backs. "They had no idea what was going on, or if they were going to be able to pay for what they needed," she says.

The experience made a huge impression. "Here I was, born and raised in the United States with all the resources anyone could have, and commissioned by Ghana to play a sport – yet, I was having problems getting access to health care when I was sick," Nartey says. "It struck me that if I was having a hard time, what about everyone else in this country that was so impoverished?"

With that in mind, Nartey majored in environmental biology as an undergraduate at Columbia University and went on to do a fellowship in which she conducted research to develop anti-malarial drugs. Ultimately she shifted her focus to policy. She got an M.A. in Climate and Society at Columbia, then came to UCLA, where she is pursuing an M.A. in African Studies and a Ph.D. at the

School of Public Health as part of a dual-degree program. Since arriving in 2006, Nartey has channeled the energy she once used on the soccer field into a myriad of activities: In addition to her studies, she serves as an appointee on the Student Health Advisory Committee and is the SPH Diversity Coordination Team co-chair, as well as co-chair of Students of Color for Public Health. She also has a daughter, born in February 2009.

Narteay continues to be interested in malaria – it is an important focus of an undergraduate seminar she has taught the last three years on the dynamics of climate and health in sub-Saharan Africa. But her goals have evolved. After recovering from her bout with malaria, Nartey went on to a fruitful career in professional soccer, representing Ghana in the 2002 FIFA African Cup of Nations and 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup. Now she has her sights set on developing Africa-based programs to promote participation in sports as a way of achieving better health outcomes. "The benefits of sports participation for young women are well documented in the United States, including delayed sexual initiation, better ability to negotiate condom use with partners, and reduced risk of gender-related violence and gender-related medical problems," Nartey notes.

Reflecting on her own soccer experience, Nartey remembers the benefits accrued by her teammates, many of whom were uneducated. "They became much more confident," she says. "It made me realize that promoting sports participation in developing countries of Africa – and especially soccer, which is so woven into the cultural fabric – could be a great strategy for catalyzing some of the health outcomes we want for young women."



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— Myralyn "Mimi" Nartey

## M.P.H./J.D. Dual Program a Recipe for Policy Influence

MORE THAN MANY graduate students, **ELI TOMAR** has spent enough time in the thick of the policy-making process on Capitol Hill to know the challenges – and in many cases, frustrations – of passing meaningful health-related legislation.

Prior to embarking on his M.P.H./J.D. through a four-year concurrent degree program offered by the UCLA School of Public Health and School of Law, Tomar spent several years working in Washington, D.C. – as a congressional intern, a government relations aide for the U.S. Soccer Foundation, and a legislative assistant and public policy analyst for two law firms, advocating in Congress as a registered lobbyist.

“It’s easy to become disheartened when you see that even getting something passed that everyone agrees on is an uphill battle,” he says. “So often, opposition to a proposal is based on politics, not policy. But it’s important to understand the inertia that exists and learn how to accomplish what you can.”

Tomar remains enthusiastic about the opportunity to positively affect people’s lives through legislation. In his workspace he proudly displays a copy of the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act of 2008, which included provisions to expand coverage for patients with end-stage renal disease as well as providing funding for patient education and prevention programs. Tomar had lobbied for the bill as part of a large coalition that included health care providers, dialysis centers and patient groups; it became law after Congress overrode a veto by then-President Bush. “These were relatively uncontroversial provisions, and yet this coalition had been trying to get them for five years,” Tomar says. “I was thrilled to see it pass.”

Tomar says he knew he wanted to go to law school well before he considered getting an M.P.H. Although he was exposed to health care policy as a child – his mother served as a policy director for the American Hospital Association – it was only after he began working with health care clients as a public policy analyst for the law firm Patton Boggs that he decided to pursue a joint-degree program.

Through the M.P.H./J.D. – the first program of its kind west of the Mississippi River – Tomar is gathering credentials that will strengthen his ability to make a difference in the nation’s capital, where he plans to return after completing the four-year program. The M.P.H./J.D. is designed to prepare students to work in health

law, a field that was already growing rapidly but offers even more opportunities since the passage of health care reform. Tomar intends to resume his work in health law and policy; ultimately he would like to help shape policies as part of a think tank or as legal counsel to one of the health-related committees on Capitol Hill.

“With the entire nation focusing on health care, it’s an exciting time to be studying these issues,” says Tomar, who is in the school’s Department of Health Services. “I’m getting a different perspective on policy and a much better grasp of everything from the evaluation of programs to the economic forces behind health care, as well as management-oriented issues such as strategy and marketing. All of this is going to be extremely helpful in my future work.”

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