

## As HIV Tester/Counselor, He Gets Up-Close Perspective of At-Risk Populations He Studies

**RYAN MURPHY** KNEW HE WOULD BE DEVELOPING analytical skills as part of his doctoral studies in the UCLA School of Public Health's Department of Epidemiology. But the third-year Ph.D. student didn't necessarily plan on becoming as intimately involved in the lives of his subjects as he has.

Since he began in the program, Murphy has worked as a graduate student researcher under the direction of Dr. Pamina Gorbach, associate professor of epidemiology. In that role, Murphy has assisted on community-based studies involving largely homeless, drug-using populations at high risk for HIV. Because the studies include HIV testing, Murphy took it upon himself to become a California certified HIV tester and counselor.

"Receiving HIV test results, positive or negative, is a big moment," Murphy explains. "For people who are taking time out of their days to participate in our studies, I wanted to make sure we were helping them in the best possible manner, and being able to provide testing, counseling and appropriate referrals was one way to ensure we could do that."

The desire to have more direct human contact is what brought Murphy into public health in the first place. As an undergraduate at Occidental College in Los Angeles he majored in biology with an emphasis in cellular and molecular biology, and considered enrolling in a molecular biology graduate program. But in public health he saw an opportunity to become involved in research where he might be able to see a more immediate impact on populations. And in HIV epidemiology, he found what for him was the best of all worlds. "Coming from a microbiology background I was very interested in infectious disease research, and HIV is obviously a huge concern in that area," he says. "But what I enjoy most is that by doing behavioral rather than laboratory-bench research, there is a level of human-to-human interaction that I didn't have before."

For his dissertation, Murphy is exploring the role of housing status on partnership dynamics and its potential relevance to the risk of HIV transmission. Studies have indicated that people in homeless shelters are up to nine times more likely to be HIV-positive than the general population – not having a stable living environment may increase the likelihood that people will engage in riskier sexual and drug-use behaviors, Murphy notes. His study is taking a broad view of housing status to include not just people with stable homes and those living on the streets or in shelters, but also people who are "marginally housed" through friends, family members or pay-by-day motels.

As with his work on Gorbach's studies, the dissertation will give Murphy a close-up view of the plight of the population he is studying – a vantage point he believes will be useful to his work. "From a purely research perspective, it gives you a better understanding of the data you're generating," Murphy explains. "If you're only on your computer and not interacting with people, it can be harder to know what led to the data and what you might need to account for in your analysis. And on a more personal level, interacting with people who are homeless and getting to know them better serves to motivate and remind me of why I'm doing what I'm doing."

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— Ryan Murphy (left)

