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— Jean Balgrosky



A Decade-Plus Later, Back to Finish What She Started

JEAN BALGROSKY (M.P.H. '80) HAD ADVANCED TO CANDIDACY FOR HER Ph.D. at the UCLA School of Public Health in the early 1990s and had already begun writing up the results of her dissertation. But she was also serving as chief information officer for Holy Cross Health System and building a family. Work and family obligations became so demanding that Balgrosky couldn't find uninterrupted time to complete her scholarly work. So she decided to take a break, promising herself that she would one day finish.

True to her word, Balgrosky is back – more than a decade after leaving. She returned to the program with experience that few doctoral students could match: nearly 20 years as a chief information officer. Balgrosky began at Holy Cross at a time when the CIO title was only beginning to become prominent in health care organizations. She established and implemented IT strategies and information systems for an organization with annual revenues in excess of \$1.5 billion. In 1997 she left to become CIO for Scripps Health, taking an organization that had grown by merger and acquisition and building the IT architecture from the ground up. Her goals included designing and implementing an integrated electronic medical record.

By 2005, having completed what she had set out to do at Scripps, Balgrosky was ready to shift gears. With the support of her family, she contacted two of her former mentors, Drs. Jonathan Fielding and Paul Torrens, who both encouraged her to return. Dr. Jack Needleman, now at the school as an associate professor of health services, took Balgrosky under his wing and worked with her to determine where she might need refresher courses.

She will explore a new dissertation topic: Balgrosky's original, on the utilization of endoscopic technologies in the office-based setting under three different reimbursement scenarios, was on the cutting edge in the early 1990s, but now, she says, the question has been well addressed. But she has a new passion: IT and the electronic medical record. “It's important to study the difference the electronic medical record makes in health care – to find out its impact on clinical and organizational outcomes – as well as where the potential benefit is not being realized,” she says. “The Institute of Medicine has pointed out that there are far too many errors occurring in our hospitals, and institutions are struggling to fix that. As health care becomes more complex, we have an obligation to look at our processes and make sure we're connecting all the dots and integrating our processes so that we are providing the best possible care.”

Although she still gets plenty of calls from professionals who want to tap into her wealth of work experience, Balgrosky is now a full-time student. She has ideas about what she might want to pursue after she completes her dissertation, but no specific plans, other than to do some teaching and research. “I know I have a lot to share,” she says. “In helping to define the role of the CIO and the electronic medical record, I was able to be involved in a lot of groundbreaking work. Even though I hadn't finished my doctorate, I felt I was living out part of what a school wants from its Ph.D.'s, which is to develop new knowledge. Now I can take that knowledge and advance it through research and teaching.”

Returning to Her Roots, She Shows High School Students Possibilities She Never Knew

WHEN **TYPHANYE PENNIMAN** WAS GROWING UP in the South Los Angeles city of Compton, she had no role models to tell her about public health. It wasn't until Penniman had completed her undergraduate education at UCLA and then gone on to work as a health educator in Inglewood that she began to appreciate the impact public health could make in underserved communities such as the one where she was raised.

"It's easy to take things for granted where you live and not realize that it could be different," she says. "It never dawned on me, for example, that there were no healthy places to eat in my community – until I moved to Westwood as a UCLA student and saw places like Whole Foods and Jamba Juice, with soy protein and tofu being sold everywhere. There was none of that in Compton."

Her work as a health educator for a nonprofit agency – in which she counseled high-risk youth on reducing risk for unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV – awakened Penniman to the difference she could make in people's lives through public health. "I became very interested in learning how to affect behaviors in my community," Penniman says. So she went back to school, earning her M.P.H. at Cal State Long Beach in 2002, and then enrolling in the doctoral program at the UCLA School of Public Health, where she has completed coursework and is preparing her dissertation on the impact of family dynamics on people with HIV. Penniman's research has been funded for the last four years by the National Institute of Mental Health, and she recently was awarded two more years of funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. After earning her degree, Penniman hopes to go on to a career in academia.

For the last year, Penniman has also served as the instructor for the school's Youth Into Health Professions course, which is taught in South Los Angeles and draws high school students from the Watts and Compton areas. The introductory public health course, offered free of charge for college credit, serves the dual purpose of motivating high school students from underserved communities to go on to college and exposing them to public health as a potential field of study. "Most of the students who are interested in a health profession have been focused on medicine," Penniman says. "That's because they haven't learned about public health – or, if they have, they didn't know that's what it was." The course's students are paired with mentors from the Students of Color for Public Health, a UCLA School of Public Health interest group in which Penniman has been active.

The opportunity to show high school students from her community the possibilities in public health – something Penniman never knew at that age – has been especially rewarding, she says. "It's wonderful to see the light bulbs go off as they realize the difference that public health measures such as taking junk food out of schools can make," she says. "They get excited when they learn what public health professionals can do, and as we talk about advocacy and show them that they can have a voice in what goes on in their communities."



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— Typhanye Penniman (center), with high school students Jesus Torres and Yvette Aguilar, part of the Youth Into Health Professions course.