

student profiles

M.P.H./J.D. Student Finds Intersection of Public Health and the Law in Advocating for Reproductive Rights



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— Larisa Mori (second from right)

WHEN SHE JOINED THE PEACE CORPS and moved to rural Kenya to begin a two-year stint teaching health in 2001, **LARISA MORI** was convinced she would return after her service to pursue a law degree leading to a career as a civil rights lawyer. Along the way, her ambitions changed. Mori did enroll in law school at UCLA, but chose to simultaneously apply to the School of Public Health as part of its M.P.H./J.D. joint program. “I still believe that the courtroom could be a fulfilling route, but Kenya got me thinking that it was not the life for me,” Mori explains. “I liked the hands-on experience of working with local community members to decide what was best in their lives instead of waiting for the courts to undertake this task.”

Mori concluded that being educated in both disciplines would lend her the authority necessary to use the law to implement important public health measures – particularly in the area of international family planning, where her passion lies. “Women carry so much of the world’s burden that not allowing them access to accurate family planning information and technologies only serves to further relegate them to an inferior position in society,” she contends. “Giving women the power to control their own bodies and regulate the timing of their children would facilitate their ascension to equal footing with men. I

would like to use existing international laws and public health advocacy to ensure that women all around the world have the option of safely practicing family planning.”

Mori believes reproductive health issues represent an ideal intersection between the law and public health, particularly at a time when *Roe v. Wade* is endangered in the United States and developing countries are grappling with issues of contraception and family planning services. She was able to see some of these issues up close last summer when, with funding from the school’s Bixby and Drabkin programs, she served as a community and reproductive health intern for a U.S. Agency for International Development-funded program in Asmara, Eritrea, that was attempting to strengthen the government’s capacity to implement health-services programs. (For more on the Fred H. Bixby Program, see page 17.) “It was somewhat frustrating,” Mori says, “because the culture is very conservative and the government wasn’t always willing to provide family planning services, even though we were hearing from women in the community that this was what they needed.”

The experience strengthened Mori’s resolve to return to working in the developing world following completion of the four-year M.P.H./J.D. program. “Seeing the progress in the United States in terms of women’s reproductive rights, and then seeing how laws and policies have begun to chip away at those rights in recent years, I have become aware of how important this issue is,” she says. “Then, being in the international field and seeing the lack of access that women have – and knowing that things could either drastically improve with just a few simple policies, or become even more difficult for women – I see this as an exciting time to be part of the field and to attempt to influence which way these policies go.”

Rare Autoimmune Disease Leads Her to Enter Public Health, Speak out on Behalf of Stem Cell Research

THE CROWDED NEWS CONFERENCE at UCLA's new Neuroscience Research Building last August featured comments from many of California's most powerful political figures, united in their opposition to congressional legislation that would place new limits on human embryonic stem cell research. But arguably the most memorable moment came when a 26-year-old UCLA School of Public Health student spoke eloquently about the personal nature of her opposition to the bill.

"I am not a governor or a senator or a famous researcher," said **CANDACE COFFEE**, a second-year M.P.H. student who was diagnosed, at the age of 24, with a rare and potentially fatal autoimmune condition called Devic's disease. "But this legislation is about me. Don't take away my hope."

A former Miss Bakersfield who aspired to a career in the performing arts, Coffee graduated with honors from UC Irvine. After college, she decided to spend time traveling and doing volunteer work in Tibet. While there, she fell ill. Within a week, Coffee was blind in her left eye. After returning to California, she went totally blind for several months and was, for a time, unable to walk without assistance. In April 2003, she was diagnosed with Devic's, which causes the body to attack the myelin sheath covering the central nervous system.

Coffee was treated with steroids and has been in remission for more than two years, but she remains blind in one eye and contends daily with stabbing headaches, nausea and fatigue. Remarkably upbeat, Coffee quips that her doctors call her a "professional patient" – she exercises daily and adheres without fail to the extensive drug regimen she is prescribed. Nonetheless, the chronic nausea and pain occasionally force her to leave the classroom, listening to lectures through the door.

Devic's changed her priorities. "When something like that happens, you come to terms with what really matters," Coffee says. "I realized I had been very self-focused and hadn't been contributing anything to my community." After her diagnosis, she took a position as a health services coordinator with the Muscular Dystrophy Association; that experience helped her decide public health was the field for her.

"This is a school filled with amazing people – passionate, idealistic and dedicated," says Coffee, who has also worked part-time at the Santa Monica-based nonprofit environmental organization Heal the Bay, where one of her tasks has been to teach children about ocean pollution from urban runoff. Her ultimate goal is to open a comprehensive care center for women newly diagnosed with chronic diseases.

Meanwhile, she continues to be a prominent spokesperson on behalf of stem cell research, a role that originated when Coffee sent unsolicited ideas to the campaign for Proposition 71, the successful 2004 California initiative to provide \$3 billion in bond funding for human embryonic stem cell research in the state.

Coffee acknowledges that not everyone from her conservative hometown agreed with her stand, but she has never regretted expressing her convictions in public. "These are embryos that are already designated for destruction," she says. "It's taking 5- to 8-day-old masses of cells that are going to be discarded and using them for something amazing – to take life that's already in existence and keep it there. Once I learned that, I couldn't understand why everyone wouldn't be on board."

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