

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.”