

Interrupted Peace Corps service turns into a practicum opportunity

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COVID-19 pandemic began to spread globally in early 2020, however, all Peace Corps volunteers were called back from service for the health and safety of everyone involved. Tulane University quickly put a plan in place to help both displaced Peace Corps volunteers and Fulbright scholars, providing them with a

generous scholarship and a beneficial way to pivot when the pandemic interrupted their plans.

Two such students are Morgan Little and Preethi Murthy, who were both in service in Guyana. Although they were in service in different parts of the country, they became friends during their time there. When they were called back to the U.S., both women took advantage of the opportunity Tulane provided and were accepted into the master of public health program in the Department of International Health and Sustainable Development. Guyana, however, remained close in their hearts, and they began to make plans to return to the South American country as part of their Applied Practice Experience, or APE.

“We designed our practicum with the help of our former Peace Corps program manager, who put us in contact with our practicum supervisor, Dr. Leslie Ramsammy, the former Minister of Health of Guyana. Together, we were able to come up with a project for us to work on that targeted the needs of the Ministry of Health as well as the needs for our practicum,” says Murthy.

The students and Ramsammy decided on a national adolescent health survey for seventh grade students, to be distributed once a year over a five-year period, a longitudinal study following them throughout secondary school. The survey will cover topics that include chronic disease prevention, sexual and reproductive health, and adolescent health services. It is designed to measure knowledge and behavior change over the study period.

In June of 2021, both students returned to Guyana for three weeks after receiving approval from Tulane to travel internationally. There, they worked with the Ministry of Health on survey design and submitting documentation to Guyana’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Both learned a great deal about the IRB process and designing a national survey.

“Working with a foreign government – and all the highlights and challenges that come with that – has been an incredible learning experience,” said Morgan. “How they operate, their chain of command, the cross-cultural communication has been an eye-opener through this experience. We got to experience the life of a project from its inception and how it comes to fruition, as well as learning so much about the IRB process, ethical research practices, and survey design. During this process we worked with representatives at UNICEF and PAHO in Guyana, which was

beneficial to our knowledge, and creating an even more informative survey.”

Both women continued to work remotely on their practicum after they returned from Guyana. Their work included distribution of surveys to an adolescent population through WhatsApp, teachers, and in person. They also assisted in the creation and development of other relevant interventions including COVID-19 vaccination outreach materials and family planning programs, as well as a statistical analysis of youth services utilized at health centers.

“As of now, the results of this study will inform future adolescent health interventions particularly in the areas of chronic diseases, front-label package warnings, sexual and reproductive health, and adolescent health services at health centers,” said Murthy. “It will also show the impact of the current health education program in Guyana and can inform future changes. There is not a lot of current data about Guyana’s youth population, which was one of the main reasons why this survey is being conducted. This will help Guyana shape more effective and responsive health programming for its youth.”

“It was an incredible time being in Guyana again and eating delicious food, and we are so lucky to have been able to travel safely to be in Guyana for this experience,” concluded Murthy.