Multidisciplinary International Research Training (MIRT) Program
Striving to Eliminate Health Disparities

"Don’t ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who are alive." —Howard Thurman

Top left: MIRT 2010 fellow Sonia Parra measuring the height of a child in Punta Arenas, Chile

Top right: MIRT 2010 Australia fellows making ceramics in their service learning work at Northcott Community Center

MID-TRIP REFLECTION OF UW MIRT 2010 FELLOWS

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“What I especially appreciate is finally getting the opportunity to see what public health research is all about. I loved working with the children and could definitely see myself taking care of patients similarly once I get older.” —Sonia Parra, MIRT 2010 Chile

“From MIRT fellowship, I have realized that excellent public health practice is not limited to having a lot of resources but can also be achieved by being creative and making it work with the available limited resources.” —Wint Wai, MIRT 2010 Ethiopia

“Epidemiology attracts me now because in my eyes it is the most powerful part of public health; after all, if prevention is perfect, lives can be saved before people even get sick.” —Laura Paiva, MIRT 2010 Peru
Snorkeling at the Great Barrier Reef, swimming in hidden Balding Bay, finding a molted snake skin, camping in the outback, observing koalas in the wild, staring at the Opera House from all angles, hiking in the Blue Mountains, service leaning in Northcott Community Center, strolling through China Town, and last but most definitely not least, statistical data analysis and epidemiological research! This is probably the shortest “one sentence” I can write about our trip to Australia. This place is nothing like I had imagined it to be.

During the first three weeks, we traveled through Northern Queensland where we got a chance to see and learn a lot about Environmental and Marine Biology. Knowing that Australia is famous for its ocean life, it was sad to see how the biggest coral reef in the world is suffering due to climate changes, and how the underwater food chain is being disrupted because of excess fishing. Gladly, the government has become aware of the future consequences that this degeneration brings along, and has implemented rules and regulations to help prevent further destruction. However, despite the challenges that the environment is suffering from, the landscape and biodiversity here is simply amazing! I would have never thought that within a three hour bus ride from the coast inwards, we could drive from a sunny beach climate, to cold rainforest weather, and to a desert-like hot outback. Now back in Sydney, we are experiencing a total switch from our sports gear in a 100% natural environment to the city style in concrete jungle.

In the afternoons, we have our course of Epidemiology, learning how to work with the SPSS program, understanding the language of statistics, and getting a valuable insight into the world of scientific population-based research. In the mornings, we go to Northcott Community Center, where we learn about the conditions and issues of public housing in Sydney by interacting with the residents. It is impressive to see how active some of the residents are, organizing different types of meetings, events, and classes. Being aware of the fact that elderly people are a majority of the Northcott community, the exercise class for elderly people in which we participate twice a week, probably means the most to me. It completely changed the way I perceive elderly people. Whoever thought that elderly people were weak needs to participate in a class like this one! I was shocked to see the weights that they lift for exercise. I had to work very hard to keep myself from looking bad.

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Another specific aspect of this trip, which is most definitely worth more than just one paragraph, was the confrontation with the history and culture of the Australian Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, their history is tragic, imprinted with abuse and exploitation. However, their culture is so strong that it partially withstood the centuries of suppression and, in some parts of Australia, has survived until this day. Some of their original 700 languages of 500 different tribes are still spoken today, and their uniquely colorful art remains conserved and continued by modern Aboriginal artists. After all the scientific readings and interviews with aboriginal elders, I gathered that the Aborigines were (and some still are) very spiritual people with a strong connection to nature and to their kinship. Being exposed to the story of the Australian Aboriginal people allowed me to understand and appreciate the culture of a group of people that would have otherwise remained completely unknown to me.

Overall, this trip has been an unforgettable one. It would have been impossible for me to see and learn all of this if I had visited Australia on my own agenda! MIRT has given me this “once-in-a-lifetime” journey that has been an inspiring learning experience, and I am continuously excited about the remainder of this trip!

This adventure has been very eventful and improved my ability to adapt to novel and challenging environments. On the whole, I believe I have grown greatly and better realized my own strength. My trip started out in North Queensland, Australia with Dr. Haynes of SUNY- Brockport (State Universities of New York). There I toured the varying climates of coast and inlands (from rainforest to the dessert-like Bush). The focus of the course with Dr. Haynes was sustainability, and I learned about efforts to preserve the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) and environments within Australia. In addition, I was able to reflect on Rural Indigenous Health within Australia. Along with background papers, I was able to interview indigenous persons and healthcare personnel that worked with Aboriginal and Torres Islander populations. Through these interviews I better realized the health issues surrounding the Indigenous Australians and the efforts being made to bridge the 17 year gap in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The people we interviewed were also very eager to share their personal experiences with health and the history of their people.

In addition to learning about Rural Indigenous Health within Australia, I also got to experience the preserved areas of Australia like the GBR and the Bush. In the GBR I lived on a boat for 4 days and snorkeled in the open ocean. Snorkeling was difficult because every time I inhaled underwater I felt like I was drowning. However, I did not want to miss one moment of the GBR and the exotic creatures I could swim with.
Abinnet cont’d

So, after about an hour of just floating on the surface on a buddy-line with our snorkeling instructor and practicing placing my head underwater I began to understand that the snorkel would only get water in it if I splashed too much or dived too deep into the water. Following this realization, I really began to experience the GBR and was greatly rewarded—I swam with a sea turtle and sharks!

In the Bush, I went on a walk with my partner and we ran into a huge snake. Without panicking too much, we waited for it to pass and stomped by it—the stomping was supposed to scare it off. In retrospect, North Queensland was amazing because of the pristine beauty of the area and because I realized how to handle stressful situations. Despite being scared of drowning or being bitten by a poisonous snake far away from any hospitals, I relatively calmly addressed each danger and came out with a great story to tell and bit more confidence in my own resilience.

The next part of the trip was in Sydney, Australia where I worked in Northcott, a community center in a housing development, and in the afternoons I had epidemiology class with Dr. Williams. While in Northcott I was working with pensioners and disabled populations. Through my interactions with the community members I was able to learn about safety within the housing complex. In the process, I discovered many of the tenant’s life-stories and even how to make a wire butterfly in art class. Working with population was so rewarding because the people were very welcoming and active in their community.

In the afternoons with Dr. Williams, I worked on our research project and composed a primary paper on the prevalence of migraine and Body Mass Index among reproductive aged women. Through our class I really gained a deeper understanding of the writing and data analysis of research. Specifically, I learned how to use new statistical analysis program (SPSS), the common underlying structure of scientific writing, and gained confidence in my ability to read, understand, and pose questions of primary and literary review papers.

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Good day from Sydney, Australia! I have to admit, when we were told that our MIRT experience was relocated from Thailand to Australia, I was a bit disappointed because I had already envisioned what our trip would be like. However, coming to Australia has been nothing short of amazing so far.

We flew into Sydney and got a brief preview of the city through the windows of our taxi and crazy driver but before we could really explore anything, we got on another plane to Townsville. For the first two and a half weeks in Australia, we met up with Professor Jim Haynes and a group of 18 students from SUNY Brockport with the AUIP Program and travelled all over Northern Queensland.

One of the most memorable times was when we sailed out to the Great Barrier Reef where we lived on a small boat called the Kalinda for three days. Learning about the reef and then actually venturing out to snorkel around one of the world’s most diverse ecosystems was just a surreal experience. It’s like you’re flying above the vast expanses of coral where you’re just engulfed by hundreds of tiny fish swimming around you. It was one of the most incredible things I have ever experienced.

We later continued on to rural parts of the outback that were hours away from the nearest cities. There we learned a lot about the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders and about their culture, current health issues, and political mistreatment over the years. It was a great experience to speak in person with various elders and people of Aboriginal decent and hear their personal views on the issues that their people are still facing.

We have returned to Sydney and it has been a completely different experience transitioning from constantly travelling out in “the bush” with 20+ people to living in a hostel with just the four of us and Dr. Williams in the middle of a major bustling city. While in Sydney, we volunteer at Northcott Community Centre every morning with Charmaine Jones, the community organizer. Northcott is an impressive public housing development and was the first of its kind in Australia. Getting to interact with the tenants is a new surprise each day because we never know who will wander into the center with a new story to tell. The array of tenants of various ethnicities, ages, and personalities gives us vivid depictions of experiences stretching from their childhood to the current issues of suicide, violence, and drug-use in the area.

So far, Australia has been nothing like I’ve imagined. Whether it is the environment, where you can be in the middle of a savannah then walk a couple kilometers and end up in a rainforest, or the people, who each have their own remarkable tales to tell, this experience will definitely be one I won’t forget.
Michelle’s mid-trip reflection

I thumbed through the travel shelves at Elliot Bay Book Company looking for an Australian guidebook. I finally chose a Lonely Planet version, the cover of which pictured dry, lonely red mountains. I was confused; where were the kangaroos and koalas? I thought of Australia as a strange land where men wore khakis and drove Subarus into the sunset, kangaroos and koalas roamed the Outback, and a place where Hugh Jackman called home when he wasn’t making the next X-Men movie.

It has been nearly two months since my trip to the bookstore, and I am happy to report that my knowledge of Australia has expanded beyond my sorry previous list! Our travels in Northern Queensland taught me about the ecology and management of the Great Barrier Reef, Aboriginal culture and history, and the advantages and challenges of sustainable tourism. The MIRT program also allowed me to have amazing experiences unique to Australia. I will never forget the thrill of swimming alongside a sea turtle in the coral reefs, or the feeling of being so brilliantly alive and in tune with the natural world during a sunrise run in the bush.

Sydney’s hustle and bustle is lively as well, though a different kind. My partner and I are currently completing our epidemiological study on obesity and migraine under the guidance of Dr. Williams. Every day presents a new challenge; we are continually learning the components of a quality research paper (and practicing the patience that must come with it). We are also interning with the Department of Public Housing, specifically at Northcott, which is the largest public housing building in Sydney.

The community center lies adjacent to the 14-floor high rise, and is the heart of neighborhood activity. The “center” offers tai chi in park, exercise and art classes, as well as a ‘cuppa’ (hot tea or coffee) and welcoming smiles to all those that walk through its humble doors.

It is hard to imagine that the Northcott community was considered to be one of Sydney’s worst areas just several years ago, infamously dubbed the “suicide towers” for its common drug deals, murders, and chaos. I believe that the amazing turnaround at Northcott is due to the community organizing and literal “knocking on doors” that occurred in 2004 as part of the city’s housing revitalization. Residents began opening their doors and sharing their stories; many came from low-income, indigenous, and/or socially-ostracized backgrounds.

The residents come from all different walks of life, but the commonality they all share is their home — Northcott. The concept of “home” extends beyond “food, water, and shelter.” This definition has long dominated and limited the public housing ideology. I now recognize that home is also about community: about the people, activities, and all other associations within that community. For myself, home is rooted in Seattle, in the Seward Park running trails, and in my mother’s Vietnamese cooking. For many Northcott residents, the community center is part of their home. It is essential, therefore, that public housing emphasize and promote community development. In short, participation in the MIRT program Australia has allowed me to study many aspects of epidemiology including seeing first-hand the social determinants of health and serving one of communities which public health strives to change. My experiences at Northcott couldn’t be replicated anywhere else — especially in a Lonely Planet Australia guidebook.

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In truth, I was a little nervous about giving up my summer to travel all the way to chilly Punta Arenas, Chile, but I can happily say that it has all been worth it. I’ve greatly enjoyed life here for the past four weeks and getting to know all the wonderful people that have made my stay here so pleasant. What I especially appreciate is finally getting the opportunity to see what public health research is all about.

The study we are working on concerning local childhood obesity in Punta Arenas has been very interesting. Childhood obesity is a major health issue not only here but all over Latin America and being able to study it up close has been truly eye-opening. My favorite part so far was when we had the opportunity to do some data collection and got to travel to a school to measure and weigh the kids ourselves. I loved working with the children and could definitely see myself taking care of patients similarly once I get older. It was great being able to practice speaking Spanish in a medical setting since I would love to go back home to San Antonio and work in a clinical setting where being able to speak Spanish would be very useful.

Reflecting back on my experiences outside the clinic, it really hasn’t been as cold as I had feared, and the breathtaking landscapes that surround me more than make the trip worthwhile. Last week, Kristen and I were able to go to Torres del Paine, a Chilean national park, where we were able to walk into caves, see magnificent waterfalls, and get up close to actual glaciers!
**Sonia cont’d**

We were also able to do some international traveling to Ushuaia, Argentina where we were greeted by many playful sea lions and got to meet some dangerous criminals from the area (Don’t worry, they were all part of the Maritime Museum in Ushuaia).

Overall, it was great being able to walk around in the infamous “Tierra del Fuego.” Did you know that the reason why it is called Tierra del Fuego is because when the Europeans arrived they saw many tiny fires lining the coast? That was because the Yamana people, the indigenous people of the region, had created them to stay warm. All the European settlers were in awe of the Yamana people who were able to go about their day wearing very little clothing and would swim in the icy waters to collect crabs and fish for food. I too am in awe of how they were able to survive so successfully in such a cold place. Learning about the Yamana culture was amazing!

I’m grateful for all traveling we have been able to do thus far and hope to do more before we leave. Everywhere we go there is something new that we’ve never seen and the people we’ve met along the way have all been extremely generous. People that I would especially like to thank are Juan Carlos and Clarita, the physicians we work with here at El Centro de Rehabilitación Club de Leones Cruz del Sur, a rehabilitation clinic for children with disabilities. Even though they are very busy making sure that the clinic continues to run smoothly, they always take time to check up on us and make sure we have everything we need. Other people I would like to thank are Dr. Annette Fitzpatrick, who helped get us started and settled, and Patricia, our host mom who really does feel like my second mom here in Chile. Also, getting to work and travel with Kristen has been fantastic and I’m very glad we were assigned to be MIRT partners together. All of these people have really made being so far away from home much easier and my experience thus far all the more better.

"The world we have created is a product of our thinking; it cannot be changed without changing our thinking." — **Albert Einstein**
Kristen Heitzinger
Graduate, UW
MIRT site: CHILE

**Kristen’s mid-trip reflection**

Since arriving in Punta Arenas, Chile four weeks ago, we have had fantastic opportunities to participate in the process of public health research and to travel Chilean and Argentinian Patagonia. The goal of our project here is to assess the prevalence of childhood obesity and to identify factors associated with obesity in Punta Arenas children. We also aim to determine how aware parents of overweight and obese children are of their child’s weight problem and to determine what child and parent characteristics are associated with a parent’s ability to accurately assess their child’s weight. While visiting an elementary school to measure heights and weights of the children, we directly observed just how common childhood obesity is in Punta Arenas—a visual assessment that is confirmed by government statistics for the region. It is both exciting and sobering to be a part of a project that addresses such an important public health issue here and to learn about the epidemic of childhood obesity in Punta Arenas, Chile, Latin America, and the world through the preparation of a manuscript reporting our study results. As a public health graduate student, this experience has caused me to think more deeply about the practical issues of study design and data collection and I hope to keep these ideas in mind as I move forward in the planning of my own dissertation project.

Aside from our research in Punta Arenas, we have been fortunate enough to be able to visit Fort Bulnes, Torres del Paine National Park, and Ushuaia, Argentina. At Fort Bulnes, where some of the first Spanish settlers arrived and established themselves in the region, we learned that the Spanish settlers had never before seen crabs, which roamed the shores of the Strait of Magellan.

In fact, they mistook them for insects and were afraid of them—a mistake that may have contributed to the starvation of most of their group. At Torres del Paine, my partner, Sonia, and I saw three glaciers and were told of the shrinking effect that global warming has had on them in the past several decades. In Ushuaia, we saw sea lions and cormorants (a black and white bird related to penguins) in their natural habitat and ate typical Patagonian cordero asado (roasted lamb), cooked over an open fire. We have been so fortunate to be able to experience the beautiful and interesting sights of Patagonia!

Of course, our time in Chile thus far would not have been so wonderful without our Chilean mentors Juan Carlos and Clarita, who take time out of their busy days to answer our questions, guide us in our thinking, and help us take full advantage of our time here. Annette Fitzpatrick, our mentor at the University of Washington, has also been very helpful in providing us with feedback on our work and even took the time to travel with us to Chile to help us get settled and oriented and arranged the travel opportunities we have so enjoyed. I have also been lucky to be paired with Sonia, a hard-working person and fun travelling companion, and to have such a kind Chilean host mom, Patricia, who always wants to be sure that we are happy and fed! Finally, I would like to thank El Centro de Rehabilitación Club de Leones Cruz del Sur, the rehabilitation center where we have been working, for opening their doors to us and welcoming us so warmly, and the Punta Arenas nursery and elementary schools, children, and parents, without whom our project would not have been possible.

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For the first time in my life, I am grateful that I was raised in a third world country like Burma; I have become more appreciated of my life, present and past alike. Everyday life in Ethiopia has been life-changing for me. Although I miss my friends and family especially mom’s home-cooked Burmese food, I am falling in love with Ethiopia’s injera, coffee, and people. I am blessed to have met wonderful people who are always willing to help and make our stay smooth and comfortable. I love bonding time with my host family as well as my colleagues at ACIPH because we can share our cultures and stories.

In addition to personal growth, this experience has been helping me grow professionally. With invaluable help from our mentor Bizu and colleagues from ACIPH, I have gained more knowledge about epidemiological practice and international public health research. From MIRT fellowship, I have realized that excellent public health practice is not limited to having a lot of resources but can also be achieved by being creative and making it work with the available limited resources. Our visit to Fistula Hospital was an inspiration. I was amazed how the hospital is practicing a holistic approach in providing medical care to patients. The hospital has become the support system for these underserved women especially focusing on empowering them. Going around the hospital and seeing hopeful and smiling faces of those women, I felt adrenaline rushed into my veins and thought myself, “Yes. This is what I want to do with my life.” It is one of those indescribable moments when you feel so much passion in your heart that all you want to do is being there for those in need and giving back to the community while asking for nothing back. I still remember the wisdom words of Bizu: “when true passion meets true talent, nothing is impossible.” That day was the reaffirmation of my dream, what I want to do for the rest of my life: to become a physician so that I can help people build healthy lives with their loved ones.

My adventure in Ethiopia has been amazing so far, so much more than I can ask for. It would not be, however, complete without our volunteering at AHOPE, the orphanage for HIV positive children. On the first day to AHOPE, we visited little kids’ compound. I was surprised by how friendly they were and the incredible amount of energy they have. Although it was a short two-hour-visit, I was looking forward to spending more time with them for the following week.

Wint’s mid-trip reflection

It was July 4th 2010. While my friends and families back in the U.S enjoyed watching fireworks for the Independence Day, I felt fireworks within me lightened by excitement as I began my adventure in Ethiopia. Surviving a 16-hour-long flight, we were glad to finally arrive at the Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Welcomed by the pouring Addis rain, I felt mixed emotions running across my mind especially nervousness as well as excitement for what I would experience during the next 7 weeks!

Addis reminded me so much of Burma; overcrowded streets and exhaust fumes from Addis traffic integrating with schoolings of sheep, goats, and cows reflect my childhood memories of both urban and rural parts of Burma. However, everyday life in Addis gives me a new perceptive of myself in both personal and professional level. Although I had immigrated to the U.S with my family only 5 years ago, comfortable and resourceful life in U.S has spoiled me in terms of taking things for granted. Nonetheless, Ethiopia reminded me of who I was and where I came from. In the past, whenever I found my identity getting caught between the worlds of Burma and U.S, I used to wish that I had immigrated to the U.S earlier in life so that I would speak “flawless” English and have an easier life integrating into U.S mainstream. However, the survival strategies I consciously and unconsciously learned back in Burma become very useful during our adventure in Addis living through days without electricity, water, and the privilege of washers and dryers.
On our first official day at AHOPE, Jumbo, the social worker took us to the older kids’ compound. There are about 50 children; as teenagers, they did not approach us as quickly as little kids did. A few minutes later, one of the girls came and grabbed my hands and took me to the girls’ room; I took it as their acceptance of my presence becoming a part of the family. I would draw pictures for them while they were busy braiding my hair. Everyday we spent time together getting to know one another better. They had full of energy and appreciated things easily. I have learned so much from them gaining a wider and new perceptive of life. Although they are HIV positive children, their status do not stop them; they have hopes and dreams like any other kids in the world. They do not complain about their misfortune but accept it as it is and move on with their lives; they taught me how to balance the reality, optimism, and hope. One of the highlights of our stay was teaching them how to wash hands properly with the candies as rewards for the job well done. It was our gift to them which hopefully will be with them forever. Although it was only 7 days, Alvin, RJ, and I got attached to those smiling and energetic faces.

On our last day, they shared what they would remember about us and sang their favorite song as their blessings for us. It was a heartwarming and very emotional day. Before we left, a girl named Bete approached me and asked “Are you coming back next summer? I will pray, ok?” I was speechless, and nothing came out from my mouth immediately. Then, I said “Oh sweetie, I will definitely come back some day.” Some day is uncertain but I have promised myself that this is not my last trip to AHOPE.

The month of July had flown by but every day here in Addis has been a blessing for me. I am grateful for every moment of it. I have learned so much more about myself personally and professionally and life in general. This experience also helps me reaffirm that some things in life cannot be replaced with money, fame, and power; my friendship built up with my host family, my colleagues at ACIPH, and my little friends with big hearts from AHOPE, stories we have shared, and life lessons I have learned from them are simply invaluable. From my experience at Fistula Hospital and AHOPE, I have realized the power of people. We don’t have godly or super powers to save others who are less fortunate. However, when the passion and spirits of normal human beings like us join together for the good common cause, the integrated power of people can make the impossibles possible and can change the world to be a better place. In terms of remaining three weeks, I am looking forward to visiting Axum and Lalibela, working hard to finish our research project, and cherishing my stay here while I can. After all, “yesterday was the history, tomorrow is the mystery, but today is the gift; that’s why it is called present.”

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Walking in a tunnel in Lalibela
Alvin’s mid-trip reflection

I was wrong when I thought my biggest challenge at AHOPE was to get the kids to like me. As I stood in the doorway of the orphanage for children born with HIV, I looked back and forth between the cab that was waiting to take me home and the kids that had forever-changed my life. It was my final day of volunteering at AHOPE. After days of playing soccer, singing the tunes of High School Musical, and learning as many names correctly as possible, it was finally time to bid farewell to my newly-made friends. As the cab drove away from the facility, I couldn’t help but think about the time I had spent with the kids. I will miss them tugging on my shirt and asking for my ‘mobile’ to play games. I will miss them tickling me because I was the only MIRT fellow who happened to be ticklish. I will miss their hugs and handshakes that I received each morning when I arrived. I will miss them turning turns to play with my gel-spiked hair. And I will definitely miss the kids who hung out with me and stood at my side each day. It is my wish that each and every one of them will overcome all of their obstacles and grow up to be successful individuals; their smiles, high energy, and surprising intelligence let me know that it is possible.

While it is only my fourth week in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the experiences I have encountered thus far have been remarkable at the very least. I have tasted and discovered great enjoyment in the coffee here. Whether it is drip or a macchiato, both the taste and price would beat a drink from Starbucks any day (at least in my opinion). I would also like to add that the fresh fruit juices are simply amazing. Beverages aside, the food is even tastier!

I had originally expected to lose weight during my time in Addis, but after days of gorging on different traditional dishes, won’t be surprised if I come home having to buypants with a larger waistline. Other aspects of Ethiopia that I enjoy (probably a little too much) are the traditional dances that can consist of head spins, shoulder movements and neck-popping. Even though I would consider myself as the world’s worst dancer, it hasn’t stopped me from making a fool of myself by performing my sad attempts at dancing in front of crowds at AHOPE and even a popular restaurant.

My work-life here in Addis, while strenuous these past few days as the completion of my research paper drawers nearer, has been rewarding. After learning the main concepts of epidemiology, I was given the opportunity to apply the knowledge using the data collected in our study. Just being able to apply what I’ve learned to a real-life setting has been a valuable experience and I am confident that I will be extra-prepared as I begin my graduate studies at Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health this fall.

With a little over three weeks left of the MIRT program, I am excited to announce that there are even more activities scheduled in my agenda. Within days, the other MIRT fellows and I will be visiting some of the most holy places in Africa: Axum and Lalibela. Our journey then continues on to the south of Ethiopia where we will visit the field sites where the data of our study was collected. Hopefully time will permit me to pay a quick visit to AHOPE before the conclusion of my fellowship here in Addis. Thus far, I am grateful for the experiences I have gained in Addis Ababa and am waiting in anticipation for more cherishing moments. I would like to thank my host-family for their compassion and eagerness to help the three of us (RJ, Wint, and I) whenever we needed it. Also, I would like to extend my gratitude to Bizu Gelaye for his mentorship and guidance on this incredible, life-changing journey.

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Addis Ababa is an orchestra of dissimilarities. Modern buildings with western-style stores stand adjacent to tiny vendors in shops constructed of corrugated tin. Business people dressed in fine suits walk the same sidewalks where beggars line the streets. Torrential rains spontaneously arrive to pound rooftops following periods of sun. And traffic moves in a chaotic frenzy yet still somehow manages to maintain a sense of order. In Addis you can expect to experience the total spectrum—as we have done.

On one day we might take lunch at an upscale, expensive Indian restaurant, and on the following day lunch might be at a tiny café where a robust meal costs us less than $1.50. Life can be just like home with both running water and electricity, but on occasion one or both will disappear, forcing us to work and cook by candlelight or bathe from a bucket. Despite the occasional lack of the luxuries we enjoy back home, life here has come to be enjoyable. Much of this has to do with the hospitality and love that our host family extends to us. Our host mother Etete and her three daughters Ayda, Yordanos, and Mesay are always willing to help us with whatever we need. We have had surprising amounts of fun doing simple things with them, like laundry by hand and making injera. Having conversation with them over our evening coffee (or buna in Amharic) is something I will certainly miss. Etete’s sons Yohannes and Dereje as well as her nephew Deju have also been tremendously helpful, in addition to giving us some great conversations and good times.

When we venture away from our home base we have been able to witness some of the true gems of Addis. The first of these was the inspiring Fistula Hospital. As our taxi travelled downhill toward the river I was not entirely sure what to expect. This would be my first exposure towards healthcare in Ethiopia and I was eager to see what it was like. When we arrived we were given a tour by one of the administrators of the compound (all the while being followed by an incredibly friendly dog who Alvin named Toby). As we went through each building of the compound we saw an incredible level of care being provided. The support system established to help these women who suffer from the terrible child birth complication is amazing. They would otherwise be outcasts of society—marginalized due to a medical condition they had no control over. But this hospital gives them free medical care, assists in their education and integration back into society, and most importantly makes them hopeful again. It illustrates exactly how the ambitions of a few people, such as Drs. Catherine and Reg Hamlin, can be manifest in something so great. However, while reflecting on the hospital I had to keep in mind that it was obviously not indicative of the actual state of majority of healthcare facilities in Ethiopia. The Fistula Hospital is blessed with being supported in large part by foreign donors, and is therefore able to provide such a high level of care to its patients. Other hospitals are not so lucky and are far more limited in their available resources. I am eager to tour a more typical hospital to understand the healthcare available to majority of Ethiopians and to see firsthand what their most pressing needs are.

While the Fistula Hospital was quite special, my greatest experience so far in Ethiopia has undoubtedly been at AHOPE, the orphanage for HIV-positive kids. I feel as if words alone cannot do justice in describing exactly how remarkable it is. These kids were born with a burdening condition that also took the lives of their parents, yet they remain so hopeful and friendly. They were all so eager to play the games on our mobile phones and go around taking pictures with our digital cameras. We have watched movies with them, played many games of soccer, basketball, and volleyball and in the process made many close friends. I was saddened that our experience at AHOPE had to come to a close so quickly. At least we were able to impart lessons on the importance of sanitation and of proper hand washing technique as goodbye gift of sorts.
Yet to be addressed in this reflection is the actual “goal” of our trip. Being able to contribute meaningfully to research that will lead to the betterment of lives is an opportunity I relish. At the Addis Continental Institute of Public Health we have learned so much about both epidemiological practices and the topic of our projects. The three of us have been absorbing as much as we can from Bizu and other investigators at the institute. Considering exactly how little I knew about regarding the topics that we have become so intimate with makes me step back appreciate the sheer quantity of material that have learned. The people at ACIPH have been tremendously hospitable. The conversations about our respective cultures or the World Cup that we had with ACIPH staff over our coffee breaks were engaging and I am happy to have gained new colleagues from this experience.

As we are a few days past the halfway mark in our journey I am thinking deeply about all that we have experienced and all that will soon experience. I am excited to see the historical and culturally rich cities of Axum and Lalibela this coming week. When do field work in the south of Ethiopia I will finally be able to observe what life is like for Ethiopians outside the city. The past weeks have been incredible and the coming weeks will be equally so. The only problem I have is fathoming exactly how a month could have possibly passed by so quickly.

If you would like to learn more or support AHOPE you can contact at:

5023 N. Parkway Calabasas
Calabasas, CA 91302
818-876-9616
Email: Tom@ahopeforchildren.org

Or send an email to mirt@uw.edu and we will direct you to AHOPE staff
Kaylee’s mid-trip reflection

Last night was a beautiful summary of my MIRT experience in Peru. Good food, wonderful people, brilliant minds, dancing, laughter, and a bit of culture shock. A surprise birthday party for Dr. Sixto Sanchez, my MIRT mentor here in Lima, was thrown by dozens of close friends and family members, and I have never seen anything like it in my life. As all good surprise parties begin, it started when Dr. Sanchez walked into a room of people that love him yelling “¡Sorpresa!” From there it was toast after toast to a wonderful man who has positively impacted so many lives, followed by dinner, delicious cake, and then “La Hora Loca”. This was phenomenal. Suddenly doctors, researchers, a midwife, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, Laura and I were thrown into a dancing frenzy as two men in full-body sequin suits tossed balloons and confetti everywhere, sprayed us in silly string, and turned up the volume.

In truth, my first month of MIRT has been very similar to this: at times unbelievably crazy; on occasion stressful; but mostly just an extremely fast learning curve for health research, Spanish, and life. Shadowing in the obstetrics ward of Hospital Dos de Mayo, I have been consistently blown away by the sheer magnitude of doctors, nurses, interns, epidemiologists, and researchers I have met who devote their lives to creating a better, healthier world. Everyone is eager to teach, excited to learn, and passionate about maintaining a high quality life. Dr. Sixto Sanchez is the epitome of this balance.

Top: Laura and Kaylee with their mentors Drs Yanez and Sanchez on a MIRT hike
Bottom: Laura and Dr. Sanchez after observing a C-section

By some miracle, Dr. Sanchez works as an OB/GYN six days a week, mentors MIRT fellows, is in the middle of multiple public health research projects, and still finds “free time” to show Laura and me the beautiful country of Peru. As experts in the field of health research and biostatistics, he and Dr. David Yanez continue to guide us and exercise extreme patience as we rapidly learn the ins and outs of SPSS and statistical analysis, huddled around a table covered in laptops. These men devote hours and hours a week to ensure that the world will have experienced young professionals prepared and excited to enter the field of global health. I’m so glad that I will be part of this legacy. Thank you to everyone who helped me to get here, it is changing my life.

In three weeks I will have my 23rd birthday here in Peru. While I am not hoping for “La Hora Loca”, I do know that I will be surrounded by compassionate people, taking a break from work, internships, and school to celebrate with me, and I have no doubt that it will be yet another memorable day.
Laura Paiva
Undergraduate, California State U
MIRT site: PERU

**Laura’s mid-trip reflection**

I woke up disoriented at 11:00 a.m. in my hospedaje, my first day in Lima. Having spent the previous night sleeping terribly on an 8-hour-long ride on a night bus from the mountains, my eyes were still scratchy from exhaustion as I showered and made myself presentable to meet my mentor for the first time. I remember groggily hoping his English was better than my Spanish, because I had been woefully inaccurate in gauging my fluency before attempting to travel alone in Peru.

My concerns were alleviated within one hour of meeting my wonderful mentor, Dr. Sixto Sanchez, who did everything possible to make us feel comfortable, including joking with us in near perfect English and ordering us fantastic Peruvian food. I still had my doubts about the project in general, however, because I think I may have been the least experienced MIRT Fellow in my year. Orientation in Seattle was a truly humbling experience as I learned how much there was to learn about epidemiology.

But Dr. Sanchez has been emphasizing that we are not in Peru only to learn about our project, but to learn in general about health and medicine and our other interests. To that end, he has been wonderful about bringing us to work with him at the beautiful Hospital Dos de Mayo, where we are allowed to shadow him and interns in the Obstetrics ward. Every day at the hospital we have been exposed to such fascinating cases. The other health professionals have been very gracious in inviting us to learn about all their work entails; I have been privileged to sit on an ultrasound and hear explanations of what I am seeing.

The interns have been fantastic about letting us tag along on rounds and filling us in on basic things they’ve learned about obstetrics. I can not even begin to describe how awed I felt the first time I was allowed to put my hand on a woman’s abdomen to feel a baby’s motion, or how speechless I was observing a C-section, in which a woman’s uterus was held in a doctor’s hands until miraculously, a baby emerged, squalling angrily at the interruption of his peaceful world.

Of course, while the hospital is fascinating and fun, the real work is our lessons with Sixto in working with SPSS to do data analysis. It has been at times challenging, frustrating, tedious, and interesting, but overall hugely educational. The intensive sessions with Dr. David Yanez, moreover, have consisted of serious efforts to make sense of all the information spilling out of our programs onto tables which we are attempting to order. As one with no history of working with this kind of information, I have been doing my best to absorb as much as I can to retain for a future in epidemiology.

Even before my acceptance into MIRT, I have given much thought to the possibility of pursuing a Master’s in Public Health in addition to an M.D. degree, but at this point in the trip, I feel confident that not only do I very much want to study public health, but I am absolutely capable of doing so. I feel that the work we are doing now is vitally important, not in and of itself or as a stand-alone study, but as just one of the many contributing pieces to a large body of medical knowledge which, collectively, advances the science. Even more, epidemiology attracts me now because in my eyes it is the most powerful part of public health; after all, if prevention is perfect, lives can be saved before people even get sick.

Among international travelers, it is not uncommon to hear stories about how much a country has influenced a person, or how changed someone expects to be upon returning home. If I’m honest with myself, at this point in my journey, it is hard to step outside of the present and speculate about whether or not I will be personally very different post-MIRT. I can say, however, that the amount of learning I have experienced in only a few short weeks so far is phenomenal. And I believe that this knowledge I’ve gained will immeasurably effect my future.

"Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do."—Goethe
Alumni Notes

Laketa Entzminger, MIRT 2005

Last month, I finished my first year of medical school:) at St. Louis University. Medical school has definitely been a humbling experience as well as a fun roller coaster ride! It is an honor to learn about the human body and be able to use my knowledge to be of help to many people. Currently, I am studying in Antigua, Guatemala. I finished my medical Spanish course today and will begin working with the nurses/doctors in the health center(s) and surrounding community next week. I’ll even get to teach a class on various health topics! That shall be very interesting... I am considering a career in foreign service and am interested in working as a physician for the US Embassy. All I can say is what an adventure!

Laketa in Antigua, Guatemala with a view of Volcan Agua

Alumni Update

Let Us Know How You’re Doing

Do you have an update or new photo to share with us?

We would love to hear from you!

NAME: ____________________________________________________________

UPDATE: __________________________________________________________________________

E-mail Address: ____________________________________________________________

NB: We have made it easier for our alumni to make updates directly online. Please go to the MIRT Web Page www.depts.washington.edu/mirt and click on the Alumni Update.
MIRT is a national program designed to encourage students to pursue careers in biomedical and behavioral research. This program provides support for undergraduates and graduate students to receive research training in an international setting. MIRT is funded by the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NCMHD) and Fogarty International Center (FIC) of the National Institutes of Health. The UW-MIRT Program has been developed in collaboration with Dillard University, Xavier University, and Western Washington University. The program focuses on population-based health research in developing countries and builds on established linkages with academic institutions in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Thailand, Republic of Georgia, Australia, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina.

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Response to Spring Photo Quiz

Thank you for all who participated in our Spring 2010 MIRT photo quiz. Linda Paniagua from MIRT 2007 was the winner of this photo quiz!

Bella Abzug was born in New York on July 24, 1920, she predated women’s right to vote by one month. She was educated in Bronx and studied law at Columbia University Law School (Harvard, her first choice, turned her down-its law school did not accept women until 1952.) A fighter for justice and peace, equal rights, human dignity, environmental integrity, and sustainable development, she has advanced human goals and political alliances worldwide.

Known by her colleagues as a "passionate perfectionist", Bella wrote the first law banning discrimination against women in obtaining credit, credit cards, loans, and mortgages, and introduced pioneering bills on comprehensive child care, Social Security for homemakers, family planning, and abortion rights. In 1975, she introduced an amendment to the Civil Rights Act to include gay and lesbian rights.

She was the first Jewish Congresswoman and was known for her wide-brimmed hats.

source: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org