Celebrating Accomplishments & Looking Forward

The National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) has elected not to renew the competing renewal for our Harvard MIRT program. Although this is disappointing news, the Harvard MIRT (formerly UW MIRT) program has been an exceptional program for 24-years with an impressive track record. The success has been due to talented and amazing students from various walks of life, dedicated mentors, exceptional collaborative institutions, and generous host families who have opened their homes to share their summer with our students. In this newsletter, we would like to take this opportunity to provide a snapshot, highlight the success of fellows and express a deep gratitude to all the MIRT Program family globally. Let us all continue with our commitment to addressing health disparities globally through research, training, and service.

“I am so grateful for my experience in the MIRT program, including the mentorship and friendships that I made. I truly believe that the MIRT Program transformed my public health career.” — Isabel Morgan MPH, MIRT 2014 Ethiopia

“I want to thank the MIRT program for the amazing experience, which opened my eyes to the endless research questions around us and gave me the confidence to pursue them.” — Ursula Lang MD, MIRT 2002 Ecuador

“The MIRT program really changed my whole outlook on healthcare and social justice and pushed me to become an activist and be very involved in state policies. It’s amazing how much can happen if you’re willing to prepare for the opportunities. So what I would say to MIRT Fellows: that opportunity that you have is a special one, an important one, it comes with a lot of responsibility but a lot of privilege.” — Representative Jonathan Santiago MD, MPH, MIRT 2003 Mexico
Below we provide an overview of the achievements of our MIRT program over 24 years.

**MIRT Program Fellows**
- 244 Undergraduate Fellows
- 200 & 44 Graduate Fellows
- 86 Colleges & Universities

**Alumni**
- 21 Alumni are Faculty at U.S. Universities and Colleges
- 163 Peer-Reviewed Published Research Papers
- 213 Presentations at International Research Conferences

**MIRT Alumni have gone on to earn**
- 91 MS/MPH degrees
- 86 MD degrees
- 27 PhD degrees
- 4 MBA degrees
- 3 JD degrees

Alumni currently in degree programs include:
- 6 MS/MPH degrees
- 14 MD degrees
- 10 PhD degrees
State Representative Jonathan Santiago, MD MPH
MIRT Fellow 2003

Jonathan Santiago was an undergraduate student at the University of Texas in 2003 when he participated in the MIRT Program Fellowship in Oaxaca, Mexico. on a project titled “Reducing stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS: evaluation of an educational program for health professionals in Mexico and Latin America.” During the summer of 2003, Jon was at the Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica (INSP, the National Public Health Institute) in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

During his tenure at INSP, Jon assisted in the “Multidisciplinary HIV/AIDS Diploma Course: Surveillance, Prevention and Care” offered to health professionals to increase knowledge and reduce stigma surrounding HIV infection. In addition to providing support during class sessions, Jon helped to develop an evaluation questionnaire, and did much of the data management for analyzing results. During his MIRT Program Fellowship, Jon worked with Drs. Avellanda, Gutierrez, and Fitzpatrick. Dr. Annette Fitzpatrick says, “During the summer that I worked with Jon, I found him to be enthusiastic, passionate and highly motivated to work in public health and for social justice!”

Following his MIRT Program Fellowship, Jon completed his BA degree in religious studies and biology at the University of Texas at Austin in 2004. He then joined the Peace Corps as a Community Health Specialist organizing immigrants and sugarcane workers in the Dominican Republic from 2006-2008. He went on to receive a Masters of Public Health in global health from the University of Washington, graduating in 2009. His thesis was titled “Identifying practices and strategies to increase HIV testing among Haitian migrant communities.” Jon was a Albert Schweitzer Hospital Public Health Fellow 2009 in Lamarené, Gabon and later also received a Fulbright Scholarship in 2009 to study in Paris France. Since 2013, Jon is a captain in the US Army Reserve.

Jon went to medical school, graduating with his MD from the Yale University School of Medicine in 2015. During medical school, Jon received the Cortlandt Van Rensselaer Creed Award for outstanding academic achievement and leadership, Yale School of Medicine Farr Scholar for excellence in clinical research, and the National Medical Fellowships Wayne Anthony Butts Scholarship for outstanding leadership and service in urban health issues.

After medical school, Dr. Santiago worked as an emergency medicine doctor at Boston Medical Center. While in Boston, he has been heavily involved in his community and sits on the boards of many community organizations including the South End Community Health Center, Friends of the South End Library, Friends of Titus Sparrow Spark, and the Puerto Rican Veterans Park.

In 2018, Dr. Santiago was elected as the Democratic Massachusetts State Representative for the 9th Suffolk district. His district includes the South End neighborhood of Boston, as well as parts of Boston’s Roxbury, Back Bay and Fenway neighborhoods. In addition to his new role as State Representative, he continues serving as a resident physician in emergency medicine for the Boston Medical Center. Dr. Santiago currently lives in Roxbury with his wife Alexandra.
MIRT Alumni Interview: Jonathan Santiago, MD MPH

We were pleased to have an opportunity to speak with Representative Jonathan Santiago.

How did your MIRT Program Fellowship impact your career trajectory?

When I was a junior at the University of Texas, I had always been interested in international travel, public health and particularly serving underserved communities. My MIRT Program experience was my first chance to do this in an international context. I had an opportunity to spend a summer in Guadalajara, Mexico and really understand what public health was at this level, being able to spend time in a different country, work on language and cultural skills, and participate in a project on HIV/AIDS. I had a personal experience because my uncle was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, which is how I got involved. But getting to work on a project and field research really inspired me! When I graduated from college, I knew I wanted to spend more time abroad and I joined the Peace Corps. I ultimately spent five years abroad involved in HIV/AIDS work and then I came back to the United States to attend medical school. As a result of my international experiences, as far back as the MIRT program, understanding the role of politics and policy and creating a fair equitable society became my passion.

What do you see as the intersections between medicine, public health and politics/advocacy?

Everything! People show up in the emergency room where I work is because of what’s going on at home and in their communities. People don’t have job security, people can’t pay their healthcare bills, people are facing difficult situations, ultimately resulting in medical emergencies. Particularly in a hospital like Boston Medical Center, where I work, the vast majority of issues there are due to policies and laws that result in those types of situations. If we can’t get those right, emergency rooms will continue to be full. I’m about half being a doctor but also half being a social worker addressing some of society’s issues. A better way to address that is through politics and that’s why I decided to run for office.

Are there any public health issues that you are looking to tackle?

I think first and foremost the opioid issue. Boston’s ninth public district, which I represent, includes the South End, Back Bay, and Fenway. The district includes the area that some people refer as methadone mile on Massachusetts Avenue. There’s a significant opioid crisis, particularly the Northeast and in places like MA and NH. In the Boston Emergency Department with my patients, there isn’t a day that goes by where I’m not dealing with overdoses and secondary infections related to overdoses. I’m involved that community every day not just as a doctor but as a resident, and I lived on Massachusetts avenue about a block away from where this takes place. I’m happy to see that the governor and the democratic legislature are really pushing forward for legislative initiatives because more can be done.

My medical expertise can speak to these issues – and not just the opioid issues but healthcare at large. Healthcare is such a big sector in the Massachusetts economy, with 40% of the budget is healthcare. As an example, just last week the legislature was talking about prescription drug coverage, which has been ongoing issue for years nationally and particularly in MA driving up healthcare costs up. Drawing on my own experiences, I spoke of my patient who was no longer able to pay for his diabetes medication and as a result developed a complication of diabetes and had to go to the ICU. It almost cost him his life because he could not pay for medication. I told this story at the meeting and the response was great. I have a unique perspective as a state representative and as a physician telling these stories.

"If you find it in your heart to care for somebody else, you will have succeeded."
— Maya Angelou
MIRT Alumni Interview: Jonathan Santiago, MD MPH cont.

What do you enjoy the most, so far, about being a state representative? What are the biggest challenges?

So I really do love this job. I feel like I literally have the two best jobs in the world. I work in the ER and I love talking with people and hearing their issues and seeing how I can best help them. That’s the medical answer - I enjoy helping people as a physician. I also love being out in the community, learning how I can best serve them. I’ve always cared about public service, as a peace corps volunteer, as a physician, and now as a representative. My contribution has been fruitful already. We’ve already helped people dealing with addiction, we’ve spoken out in support of schools as well as other organizations. Its wonderful to be in a position to support and make changes. The difficult part is we’re a democracy and you have 150 people in the House of Representatives—and you need to collaborate with republican colleagues, democratic colleagues, those from western Massachusetts, those from rural areas—and they’re going to have different perspectives. That can be challenging at times, but it’s also a place we can learn and that’s why I think it’s so important to listen to your colleagues and constituents, as well as my patients. So I take that approach. It’s important to listen to them, so I can be the best advocate for my patients and my constituents.

In reflecting back to your undergraduate/graduate studies, what advice would you give to MIRT Program Fellows?

Before participating in the MIRT Program I wanted to be a physician, but I didn’t really have an understanding of what role public health had and the potential that it had to change lives. Thanks to MIRT – I did MIRT when Dr. Michelle Williams was at the University of Washington – and I did my MPH at the University of Washington because of her and the relationships that I had there. The MIRT program really changed my whole outlook on healthcare and social justice and pushed me to become an activist and be very involved in state policies. It’s amazing how much can happen if you’re willing to prepare for the opportunities. So what I would say to MIRT Fellows: that opportunity that you have is a special one, an important one, it comes with a lot of responsibility but a lot of privilege. You should take advantage of giving back and realize that you’re not all going to be public health PhD folks, or maybe not become medical folks, but this experience really exposes you to different parts of public service. Ultimately, the important thing is making people’s lives better daily and there are a whole host of ways for us to do that. Public health and medicine, policy, advocacy. So much of what we do and the lives we want to save and improve is built in policy efforts and changing legislation. Public health research and data is very important, but we can’t forget that there is a real life component to this. That there are people dying and struggling and you want to be aware of that and how you can give back. We have these high level discussions at the state house but we can’t forget what’s going on outside in the hospital where I work. There are people being affected and dying from these issues every day. It’s about proximity and being close to and listening to the people that you’re trying to help.

"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."
— Ralph Waldo Emerson
MIRT Alumni Spotlight: Isabel Morgan, MPH

Isabel Morgan had recently graduated with a bachelors in anthropology from Mount Holyoke College when she participated in the MIRT Program Fellowship in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2014. During her fellowship, she worked on an analysis examining the association between sleep disturbances and quality of life among Ethiopian migraineurs. With mentorship from Drs. Gelaye and Tadesse, their research was published in the Journal of Headache and Pain (“Morgan et al., J Headache Pain. 2015; 16(18). PubMed PMID: 25902831).

Isabel Morgan, MPH  
MIRT Fellow 2014  
MIRT Site: Ethiopia


After graduating from my master’s program, I worked in the Division of Reproductive Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As a Reproductive Epidemiology Fellow, I evaluated evidence for the U.S. Medical Eligibility Criteria for Contraceptive Use by conducting systematic reviews on the safety and effectiveness of hormonal contraception for women with specific medical conditions (e.g., diabetes) or characteristics (e.g., adolescent). I loved this experience and was blessed to have mentors dedicated to providing a fellowship tailored to my research interests.

In Fall 2018, I matriculated into the PhD program in the Department of Maternal and Child Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a minor in epidemiology, I am challenged academically and supported by talented students and insightful faculty. My research focuses on women’s experience and satisfaction with postpartum care services and health inequities in the quality of postpartum care. Excitingly, I was recently awarded an appointment on the NICHD Reproductive, Perinatal and Pediatric T32 Traineeship through the Department of Epidemiology for the 2019-2020 academic year!

In addition to my academic work, I co-developed a social justice program for Black undergraduate and graduate scholars in Cape Town, South Africa in 2015. In March 2019, I traveled to Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa to work on an independent film project on wealth inequality and land expropriation, 25 years since the first democratic election. Additionally, my passion for addressing health inequities in maternal health and birth outcomes has led me to join the Research Working Group of Black Mamas Matter Alliance. BMMA and its Kindred Partners are shifting the national conversation about the importance of respectful maternity care practices to improve maternal mortality and morbidity in Black mama populations.

I am so grateful for my experience in the MIRT program, including the mentorship and friendships that I made. I still keep in touch with my fellow MIRT colleague, Ornella Rutagarama. (We had dinner at a new vegan restaurant in her city last month!) I truly believe that the MIRT Program transformed my public health career.”
MIRT Alumni Spotlight: Ursula Lang, MD

Ursula Lang was a junior at the University of Washington when she participated in the MIRT Program Fellowship in Ecuador in 2002. During her fellowship, she worked on a project identifying highest at risk areas in Pedro Moncayo County related to maternal health and use of health services in a population of women between ages 15-49.

I remember my summer in Ecuador through the MIRT program fondly, not only for getting me on track with a research focused career, but also for the life-long friends I made (Lorena Chavez!). Since that summer, I went on to graduate from the University of Washington with a degree in Biochemistry and interest in pursuing a combined MD/PhD. I spent a year after graduation in the NIH Academy, further solidifying my interest in basic science research and learning more about health disparities through weekly small group discussions and lecture series.

I then accepted a position in the medical scientist training program (MSTP) at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in NYC. Those were 9 very exciting and fulfilling years exploring ways in which to combine both my passion for scientific discovery and making an impact on medicine. I spent 5 years in Dr. Scott Friedman’s lab where I developed my skills as a molecular biologist and gained a valuable mentor and role model for a physician-scientist career. During my 3rd and 4th years as a medical student, I found myself interested in the field of dermatology, as it seemed to have more questions than answers with respect to the pathogenesis of many diseases. As part of an away elective during my 4th year, I spent a month at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) and discovered the subspecialty of dermatopatology, the practice of diagnosing dermatological diseases. Ultimately, I found my ideal residency fit in pathology, and matched at UCSF. I spent part of my residency laying the foundation for a post-doctoral fellowship in the field of melanoma research. A year of fellowship in dermatopathology followed at Stanford University, and I immersed myself in learning this fascinating clinical specialty. Throughout this time, I worked with many talented faculty, Drs. Timothy McCalmont and Jinah Kim in particular, on research projects that lead to presentations at national conferences and publications. Having finished my formal training, I am now back at UCSF and have the great privilege of continuing to pursue my research interests, using my clinical skills as a dermatopathologist to inform my research direction. I want to thank the Harvard MIRT program for the amazing experience, which opened my eyes to the endless research questions around us and gave me the confidence to pursue them.
MIRT Alumni: Brief Updates

- Alvin Tran, ScD, MPH (MIRT Ethiopia 2010) recently accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Public Health at the University of New Haven. Alvin worked on a project titled “Prevalence of Metabolic Syndrome among Working Adults in Ethiopia” (Int J Hypertens. 2011). Since completing the MIRT Fellowship in Ethiopia, Alvin has earned an MPH from Emory University and an ScD in the Department of Nutrition, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

- Kia Byrd, MD, MPH (MIRT Ethiopia 2013) Dr. Byrd was an undergraduate at Howard University in 2013 when she participated in the MIRT program in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She worked on a project titled “Sleep Disturbances and Common Mental Disorders in College Students” (Byrd et al. Health Behav Policy Rev. 2014. PubMed PMID: 25309939.) Since her Harvard MIRT Fellowship, Dr. Byrd completed her MPH in Health Policy at the Harvard School of Public Health and her MD at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Byrd will begin her medical school residency at Department of Internal Medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center in the fall of 2019. Read more about her accomplishments here.

- Keona Wynne (MIRT Ethiopia 2017) recently graduated with her Masters in Bioethics from Harvard Medical School. Keona was an undergraduate at Howard University when she participated in the MIRT Program in Addis Ababa Ethiopia. She participated in a project titled “Immediate risk of myocardial infarction following physical activity, tea, and coffee: A case-crossover study in Thailand.” She will be beginning her doctoral degree at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Fall 2019.

- Marshala Lee, MD, MPH (MIRT Thailand 2005) has a new position as a Harrington Trust Physician Scholar and Harrington Value Institute Community Partnership Fund Director at Christina Care Health System in Delaware. Dr. Lee was an undergraduate at Tougaloo College at 2005 when she worked on a MIRT project titled “Risk Factors of Hypertension & Correlates of Blood Pressure and Mean Arterial Pressure among Thai Patients.” Since her MIRT Program Fellowship, Dr. Lee received her MD from Brown University and MPH in Healthcare Policy and Management from the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health.

Dr. Bizu Gelaye congratulating Keona Wynne during her MPH graduation (left). Kia Byrd’s graduation ceremony (above).
MIRT/MHIRT 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 Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD). The Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health MIRT (formerly the University of Washington MIRT) Program was 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, Vietnam, Thailand, Republic of Georgia, Peru, New Zealand, Mexico, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Chile and Australia.

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“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” — Mark Twain

MIRT Fellow Anne Wells (MIRT Peru 2015) in Machu Picchu, Peru