

EL OBSERVADOR

Immersed in Mexico's Health Care

OHSU nursing students gain cultural skills with life experience

John Jessup, nursing instructor in the community health program at Oregon Health Sciences University, noticed his students were primarily Anglo, while 10 percent of the Oregon population is Hispanic. Meanwhile, scarcely one-half of 1 percent of Oregon's nurses personally reflect this Hispanic heritage, a critical problem of the nursing shortage. So Jessup determined to prepare students to work with Latino clients and patients more effectively.

Even if students were not Hispanic, they could certainly be culturally competent. In 1997 he began escorting ten OHSU undergraduate or four graduate nursing students at a time to La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico. There, the students are quickly immersed in a one-month total experience.

La Paz, which means 'The Peace,' is a Gulf Coast city of more than 200,000 people with sparkling beaches and warm blue skies. But OHSU students seldom see this side of the city. They immediately begin work within the Mexican medical system, acquire Spanish language skills, investigate the



Colleen Casey (center), a senior nursing student at Oregon Health Sciences University is pictured with her host family in Mexico.

national health structure and live with local families.

Colleen Casey, a senior graduating this June, lived with a family of seven in a two-bedroom house of cinder block walls and a corrugated metal roof. She loved every minute. Chickens clucked throughout the house and roosters woke her every morning. Her host family lacked hot water, and Casey shared a room with two teenage girls.

"I adored my family and became

part of it," she said. "They're very tight-knit. One of the daughters is a nursing student and the oldest son plays in a local band. Essentially, he's the family breadwinner. We all pitched in. If the gas tank for the stove needed changing, everyone got up early to go get it filled. When the mother sold tamales during a national holiday parade, we woke up at 5 a.m. to help her put them together."

"The month is so intense,"

Jessup said, explaining that students leave host families at 7 in the morning only to return at 8:30 or 9:00 p.m. each night. "Students learn what it's like to be a minority within the majority Mexican culture. They take public transportation, live in the barrio (ghetto), and often have running water only a couple hours each day."

The students begin each morning with four or five hours in various clinical sites — hospital wards,

barrio clinics, a Red Cross urgency clinic or rural mobile clinics. They offer immunizations, dental help, or health education on preventive care, such as lactation or diabetes — all in Spanish. Followed by a 1 1/2-hour class on community and cultural health issues with Jessup, students spend the last four hours of the day with a Spanish tutor.

If the schedule isn't daunting enough, the homework certainly is. Jessup requires 20 new vocabulary

words each day and a Spanish oral exam complete with clinical scenarios. Students also develop a friendship with a Mexican peer, conduct a complete assessment of both a local family and a health facility, write a hypothetical community health grant and, finally, assess, analyze and present the entire infrastructure of La Paz — including health, public safety, economic, transportation and educational systems.

Casey muses about both the intensity and wonder of the experience.

"We were embraced as nurses," Casey said, explaining she and her colleagues wore white from head to toe each day, as do all Mexican nurses. "We became invested in the community in a way only those who live there can."

Now when she helps patients in Oregon, she has a completely new perspective.

"I try to meet them where they are. It's more than being able to speak Spanish or having a conversation about their health needs in their native tongue. It transcends that. I am beginning to understand where they come from, what their health system was like, and what their lives are," she said. "From now on, I'm open to expanding my horizons to considering health and illness completely out of the box. There's no doubt about it, I'm just going to be a better nurse."

Jessup is awed by students who complete the immersion.



Rescue teams search through the rubble in Colima, Mexico after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake. (AP photo)

Relatives Mourn Mexico Quake Victims

(AP) — Soldiers and sailors fanned out to help residents and survey the damage in Colima, Mexico after a Jan. 21 earthquake killed 28 people and left about 10,000 homeless.

Many survivors were crowded in shelters or beginning to clean rubble from their shattered homes in Colima state, 300 miles west of Mexico City.

People wandered, dazed and awed by the damage, past the roped-off streets and shops of

the hard-hit city of Tecoman, where an estimated 30 percent of homes were damaged or destroyed.

Shopkeepers in Tecoman began sweeping up shattered glass from storefronts in what had become a ghostly downtown, as Mexican navy sailors worked to clear chunks of concrete that had tumbled into the street from nearby buildings.

In Colima, the state capital, Vicente Rodriguez sat several feet

from his mother's flower-laden coffin, hardly seeing residents scurry past wearing dust masks.

"I did what I could to save her but it was useless," he said as friends and relatives embraced him and paid their respects at an outdoor memorial for 83-year-old Maria Rodriguez Macia.

Rodriguez, 53, was at a neighbor's home Tuesday night when the 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck, shaking the walls, cutting power and causing the earth to

ripple like water beneath him.

Like thousands of others, he ran outside, stumbling several blocks down the darkened streets to find both his mother and sister trapped beneath a mountain of earth, metal and stone that had been their humble adobe house.

President Vicente Fox toured devastated neighborhoods, promising to help rebuild the houses from newer, stronger materials that would withstand the force of future quakes.

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