



Julie Mann with Marielle Celicourt, a Haitian midwife

Of Flexibility and Fulfillment: Undertaking Public Health Research in Haiti

Julie Mann didn't take long to decide to apply for a Downs Fellowship. "I knew when I came here that I wanted to do it," she recalls. Interested in international health for years as an eventual career focus, Julie maintained an open mind to any opportunities that might come her way and actively sought a place to study and work last summer.

A wide-cast net and meticulous investigation led Julie to the Boston- and Haiti-based organization, Partners in Health, which invited her to spend her summer in Haiti aiding in Partners' research. A future nurse-midwife, Julie was excited to have a hand in the design of her research project, a survey of antepartum and postpartum adherence to antiretroviral therapy in HIV-infected women in rural Haiti. Julie left for Haiti somewhat "scared and nervous" but "mainly excited" and "ready."

Despite copious preparation, Julie was surprised to find that her initial plan would be difficult to set in motion. "The whole system was a mess," she confesses. Julie had intended to track women's rates of adherence to antiretroviral therapy, but she discovered that the women were not getting the treatment as planned. Julie immediately recentered herself and redefined the goals of her research: "I had to be open to as many possibilities as I could..."

A quick glimpse through a doorway of a rural Haitian household



It was a wonderful experience in public health, though I had never had a course in public health!"

By the end of the summer, which she describes as "powerful" and "unbelievable," Julie succeeded in helping to set up the antiretroviral therapy program and in securing one research participant for her thesis. As her abstract states, "Administering combination antiretroviral therapy in HIV-infected pregnant women in rural Haiti is a difficult task that requires a secure infrastructure in order to implement." Julie observed that adherence is contingent on the creation of such a stable infrastructure, comprised of community health workers and directly observed therapy.

Julie's work this summer motivated her to "study as much as she can to provide the absolute best care" worldwide. "Seeing these faces that were suffering" from Haiti's widespread abject poverty greatly impacted her attitude toward school—and toward life in the United States. Julie recalls experiencing a complicated mix of emotions upon returning home. She found herself "thoroughly disgusted with our gluttonous lives here in the U.S." Additionally, she felt saddened by the isolation which she felt: "I had lived in a community in Haiti. I was never alone." Back in her quiet home, Julie missed the "unbelievably friendly" and "welcoming" interactions of her hosts.

Julie's trip served a variety of purposes, some planned and some unintended but fortuitous. By helping to fill the gaps in the antiretroviral therapy program, Julie gained a wealth of public health knowledge and ensured that many Haitian women would be served. She completed her thesis research and forged indelible connections with her Haitian and American colleagues at Partners in Health. Most importantly, Julie explains, "I needed to see it to rejuvenate myself and remind myself why I was studying so hard... And that's exactly what happened." 🏠