Trevor Pour ‘10 with some of the teens he taught (and learned from) this past year at the King Street Youth Center.

Medical students find community connections deepen the meaning of their vocation.

by EDWARD NEUERT

photography by RAJ CHAWLA
On a cold winter day in downtown Burlington, a homeless teenager crosses the street to the clinic she’s just heard about, where she can get free medical treatment for the first time in years. In a church hall in central Vermont, a dairy farm worker thousands of miles from his home in Mexico hears a message on how to cope with depression, and receives a winter coat to keep out the cold. At an after-school youth center, a bunch of teens gather to play a game and learn about making healthier dietary choices. And in a lecture hall on the UVM campus, a pediatrician attending a special colloquium gains a deeper understanding of the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth who present for treatment.

Each one of these positive experiences is the result of the planning and hard work of the kind of people who by definition already have a lot on their plate — second-year students at the College of Medicine. Through programs such as the Schweitzer Fellows Program, and through many other individual efforts, medical students make a positive difference to the health and wellbeing of people throughout the community. In this they follow the words of the great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, who said that those who are really happy are “those who have sought and found how to serve.”

Supporting student-community connections since 1996, the New Hampshire/Vermont Schweitzer Fellows Program annually selects a group of health science and legal students to carry out health-related service projects.

“Like all rigorous pursuits, medical education can be all-engrossing,” says Associate Dean for Student Affairs Scott Waterman, M.D. “The Schweitzer Fellowship Program reminds us all of the wider calling of service to the community of which medicine is a part, while providing a mechanism through which students can complete specific projects that improve the lives of our neighbors.”

Heidi Schumacher ’10 built on her past experience for her community project. She is the third generation of her family to have a connection with the College of Medicine. After college, she spent time in non-profit management and working with homeless adolescents in New York City before entering medical school. “It seemed natural that I should get involved with something that would help homeless youths,” she explains.

Schumacher focused on the Pearl Street Clinic, run by the non-profit Community Health Center of Burlington. Located on a busy street just a few steps away from Church Street, Burlington’s main shopping district, the clinic and its next-door neighbor, Spectrum Youth and Family Services, are a world away in atmosphere from the trendy boutiques and restaurants just around the corner. Here, at-risk youth can find advice and support as they attempt to make the successful transition to adulthood.

“My task was to try to gain greater access for the clinic to the population of homeless adolescents in the Burlington area,” says Schumacher. To do this, she set about researching and writing a community needs assessment that could guide the clinic to better promote its services. Schumacher conducted interviews and focus groups with kids, and met with the staff of agencies in the community who work with homeless young people — a description that covers a wide variety of people. “There are relatively few youths who actually live ‘on the streets’ in northern Vermont, she says. “But there are many more kids who may have been kicked out of their house, or left for their own reasons, and now ‘couch surf’ at friends’ houses.”

Schumacher’s thirty-page needs assessment, which she delivered to the clinic in December, offers a clearer view of the clinic’s potential clients, and concrete suggestions on how to promote its services to keep kids in risky situations in better health.

Two thousand miles and sixty degrees Fahrenheit separate the Mexican countryside from Addison County on a Saturday in January when Luz Felix-Marquez ’10, rolls into a church parking lot in Bridport in a station wagon whose cargo area is stuffed with bags of warm winter coats, shirts, and other clothing. The winter gear has been donated by students, staff, and faculty from across the UVM campus. Luz Felix-Marquez was able to gather tremendous enthusiasm among the remarkably large number of participants that Saturday,” says Associate Dean for Student Affairs Scott Waterman, M.D. “It serves as an introduction to the wide variety of needs — and ways of serving those needs — in our local community.” More than 100 students participated in the August 25 event, performing volunteer work for 14 different community agencies in the Burlington area.

The commitment to community service runs deep throughout the College of Medicine student body. That was demonstrated in a big way at the beginning of this academic year with the inauguration of an event that promises to become a tradition at the school — COM Cares Day. The event was sparked by the widespread desire among all students to serve their surrounding community right at the beginning of the year, before course work and other commitments make big claims on students’ time. “There was tremendous enthusiasm among the remarkably large number of participants that Saturday,” says Associate Dean for Student Affairs Scott Waterman, M.D. “It serves as an introduction to the wide variety of needs — and ways of serving those needs — in our local community.” More than 100 students participated in the August 25 event, performing volunteer work for 14 different community agencies in the Burlington area.

“COM CARES” — and dozens show it
“Many of these workers have no real idea how cold it can get here when they came to work in Vermont,” says Felix-Marquez. “This clothing is really needed to keep them healthy and safe.” This is the second such yearly clothing drive run by the student-run group, Covered Bridge Health Services.

But the clothing distribution is a sidelight — albeit an important one — to the original reason for Felix-Marquez’ visit on this day. As a part of her Schweitzer Fellowship project, she has been working in partnership with the Middlebury-based Open Door clinic to provide monthly health-related services and education to the dairy farm workers. On this day, she and other interested students have come to the church hall where, after a Spanish-language religious service, they will run a health outreach clinic to provide monthly health-related services to dairy farm workers. On this day, she and other interested students have come to the church hall where, after a Spanish-language religious service, they will run a health outreach clinic to provide monthly health-related services to dairy farm workers.

The community project of Trevor Pour ’10 developed out of an encounter brought about by his Medical Student Leadership Group, a key component for first-year students in the Vermont Integrated Curriculum. “We wanted to do something for the community as a group, so we volunteered at the King Street Youth Center in Burlington,” he explains. “I had taught school for a year before coming to med school, and this experience at King Street reminded me how much I liked working with middle-school aged kids.” So Pour put together a project based around 20 planned health information sessions for youths. He found that, in practice, even the most careful planning sometimes has to be adjusted.

“I was way too ambitious and over-prepared for this audience,” he says now with a laugh. “The kids I was seeing at King Street had just gotten out of a full day of school. Now, here I was showing up and thinking they’d all just sit down and listen to me? It was clear right away that wasn’t going to work, so I went back and changed how I was going to approach this.”

Pour’s reformulated approach involved throwing out the lectures, and instead building group activities that he could lead along with one of the teens from the center. Throughout the fall and early winter, these peer-led sessions covered issues ranging from proper nutrition to the dangers of cigarette smoking to the importance of wearing bike helmets and car seat belts. For the session on nutrition, Pour and his young “co-host” led the group through a game show designed to highlight the highs and lows of sugar consumption.

“This change really turned my project around,” he says. “Even after this project is over, I plan to keep volunteering at the center, and I hope this kind of program can continue with med students next year.”

Greta Spotswood and David Longstroth set out on their community project with the goal of improving the quality of medical care for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning (LGBTQ) adolescents in northern Vermont. “This is a population that often goes under the radar due to institutional unfamiliarity and discomfort,” they explain in their project report. “Because many are
reluctant to discuss the issues involved, the needs of this population go unmet. We sought to find ways to bridge the medical community and this population, and we worked to develop and implement competencies that will help train physicians to provide the best care for LGBTQ patients regardless of underlying attitudes.”

“We also wanted to bring positive closure to an incident that happened on campus in 2006, when a homophobic email was sent out as a joke to our fellow students,” explains Spotswood. “We felt that there was a lot of conscious-raising to be done, and this would be a good way of making something positive come out of that experience.”

The two second-year students worked with many people across the UVM and local communities, including Professor of Pediatrics Barbara Frankowski, M.D., of University Pediatrics, Professor of Pediatrics Paula Duncan, M.D., who is course director of the Generations Foundations course in the medical curriculum, Karen Richardson-Nassif, Ph.D., associate dean for multicultural affairs, as well as staff members from Outright Vermont and RU12?, two organizations that serve the LGBTQ community. Longstroth and Spotswood surveyed the health needs of the community, and identified ways local medical providers could meet those needs. They then organized a successful colloquium in late November 2007 that brought together faculty and students from all four years of medical school to discuss the health care needs of LGBTQ patients.

“What’s most gratifying is the openness we’ve found for incorporating our findings longitudinally into the medical curriculum,” says Longstroth.

Spotswood and Longstroth look forward to passing their project’s focus along to other students as they go off to pursue clerkships. That’s a sentiment shared by all the students whose Schweitzer projects have now come to a close. “I’m really hoping to find someone in next year’s entering class who’ll be interested in keeping the connection with King Street going,” says Trevor Pour.

In this, he and all the students involved in community service follow the sentiment expressed by Albert Schweitzer 60 years ago: “Do something wonderful,” the doctor advised simply. “People may imitate it.”