

### *Learning to be an Advocate: One day at a time*

A student's reflection on attending the Consortium of Universities in Global Health 2016

Of my professor's social inequality stories from Lima, the chicken dinner story haunts me most. It is of two students from his time as a middle school teacher in one Lima's most dangerous outskirt neighborhoods. He had promised to take them anywhere they desired for dinner in exchange for exam success. The students had requested to eat chicken, standard Peruvian occasion fare. Rather than a local *polleria*, they had chosen an address in the heart of downtown Lima, three hours by bus. My professor had begrudgingly agreed. Four bus rides later, he recalled walking the final mile to the restaurant and realizing he was alone. Turning around, he saw the girls, over a block away, slowing down, and staring in awe at the lights and skyscrapers.

My professor recalled how striking it was that girls lived twelve years in the capital of Peru had never before seen skyscrapers. When it was told to me, the story was used to illustrate structural inequality. My undergraduate experience as a student in my professor's social inequality and stratification class became my own jumping point for interest in global communities: my own time as a middle school educator for a year in Lima, and involvement in coordinating the Creighton school of medicine's service-learning program, which led me to attend the Consortium of Universities in Global Health Conference (CUGH) in San Francisco this year.

My understanding of "Advocacy" continues to evolve; this commentary will share how a weekend at CUGH influenced this understanding. The mission of CUGH holds high promise: "creating equity and reducing health disparities everywhere." With the faces of friends and "global" peers from many communities in mind, I was excited to attend the conference. This excitement was quickly replaced by awe and uncertainty at arrival in downtown San Francisco. The, bright, shiny, and energetic tide of lanyards and suits was not what my experience as an educator on the sandy outskirts of Lima had prepared me to associate with Global Health. Standing at the doors of the opulent opening speeches, I felt a bit like the girls in downtown Lima. I could not help but wonder if those most impacted by global health were present.

The Saturday afternoon conference session on "Failed States" dispelled misgivings about conferences as a form of advocacy. Prior sessions attended focused on dates, facts, and science - diagnosing problems and presenting research, but not action items. In "Failed States," a young, doctors from *Medicins sans Frontieres* (MSF, Doctors without Borders), quietly rose to the podium and questioned the academic world's response to Ebola a year earlier. He questioned the global hesitancy to respond to one of the world's true global health emergencies and the repercussions faced by university faculty who chose to assist. As he asked questions to a silent room, my heart responded - wrapped in his message were questions I had asked myself as a service-learning program coordinator, when our board had made the decision not to send students to Ghana the year before, a country peripheral to the Ebola outbreak.

This MSF doctor had not come to tell war stories for his own benefit. He had not come to showcase himself as a savior or hero. He had come to advocate. While he acknowledged the limitations of institutions with student and faculty safety concerns, he was forceful and honest that the academic world of Global health could do better. He pushed for a creative solution - one that could utilize University capacity for research and evaluation of relief efforts to improve alleviation of future Global crises. His words spoke to the personal tension of advocacy I felt since first going to Peru - the tension of living in two worlds - between advocacy and abandonment. While patients' suffering the effects of Ebola were not physically present, their story was conveyed in the painful truth told by the MSF doctor.

What I took from CUGH was the familiar lesson that no checklist exists for advocacy and solidarity - Learning how to be an advocate is a process. Advocacy is asking hard questions - of yourself,

institutions, communities, and societies. To me, the MSF doctor's honest critique was the conference's most prophetic moment. While attendance at CUGH did not answer the personal vocation question of whether I feel called advocated on the ground or in the sphere of academia, it confirmed advocacy is possible on all levels. Humility and self-insight are potentially our greatest gifts for change - action item students can take.

The saddest piece of my professor's story was the ending - when he and his two students arrived at the restaurant in Downtown Lima, the girls stared at the price of chicken. Despite his insistence, they had refused to eat at the restaurant, because the prices were too expensive. They turned around, journeyed four buses back to their neighborhood, and ate chicken at a local *polleria*. Since my professor's story was told, Lima has grown into an intersecting metropolitan city; there are air-conditioned aerial trains transporting distances that used to take half a day by bus in a half an hour. This growth further complicated structural inequalities - simultaneously bridging and reinforcing. There is much work to be done to bring all parties to the table of conversation - to move towards inclusion.

This article is not meant to be advice, but a calling, well articulated by Dr. Tom Kelly, to "live life as a question." Advocacy is the courageous questioning of things we love - sharing of our own personal reflection of what needs to be done, and keeping those we love at the center. The globalization of advocacy networks is an exciting opportunity for us to learn and participate in the conversation surrounding important issues - and be moved to act. While the overwhelming tension between two worlds often makes me want to run and hide, CUGH challenged me to look at advocacy as today - to view each question and conviction reached as a practice of courage and renewal of commitment to communities and the girls from the chicken story.

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