

GLOBAL HEALTH

Middlebury College
Global Health Newsletter
Winter 2022

Greetings,

We hope this finds you healthy, hanging in there, and finding silver linings. This is our first newsletter since spring of 2020 – that feels both recent and a long time ago, given the weirdness of COVID time.

Global health students at Middlebury are a passionate and motivated bunch. Bravo and thanks to our students, parents, and alumni who are working to promote health via many different activities, fields, and career paths. Keep up the good work, and keep in touch!

My name is Chris Donohue, and I'm a sophomore majoring in mathematics and minoring in Global Health here at Middlebury. I hope you enjoy reading the newsletter as much as I did creating it!
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Teaching Empathy

Helen Riess (P'13 P'15) is the Co-Founder and Chief Scientific Officer of Empathetics, Inc., an organization working with medical professionals to develop greater interpersonal skills and teach the “neuroscience of emotion.” Empathetics Inc. has extended its resources all around the world, including into South Africa, Europe, Australia and Canada.

Riess initially wanted to become a doctor because of familial experiences, **as her parents were both deeply affected by World War II.** Growing up, she longed to provide a “healing experience” to those suffering, knowing she wanted to become a doctor at a young age. After receiving her bachelor's on the pre-med track, she began her studies at Boston University School of Medicine.

It was only within the first month of classes that she knew she wanted to be a psychiatrist, **as she discovered her deep interest in “under-**

standing people's minds and experiences.” After receiving her MD, she pursued a Psychiatry Residency Program at Harvard Medical School.

In her career as a psychiatrist, Helen mentions that she felt a distinct, “steady drumbeat of patients feeling that nobody was really listening to them,” and that they had “no connection with their healthcare provider.” Riess explains that while these patients had the ambition to improve certain medical conditions, they felt as though they went unheard. **This perpetual patient frustration led to a significant question that would frame Riess's research for years to come: “is it possible to teach empathy?”** We have vast understanding that it is possible to “beat it out of people,” she remarked, but there had been no research on the capabilities of systematically reintroducing the ability to empathize – particularly in the field of medicine.

Riess set out on years of research and testing in order to come up with a **“validated approach,” that could be translated into a global health setting.** She realized that once she had strong data, she could go from the “one-on-one impact” in a particular hospital, to the opportunity to impact “healthcare

organizations around the world.” This led to the development of **Empathetics, Inc.**, with inspiration and help from a Middlebury connection.

Riess conveys her gratitude to **Charlie MacCormack '63**, former CEO of Save the Children, an international NGO that focuses on promoting protection and health

Charlie MacCormack '63 on Empathetics

“Tribal instincts run deep in the human personality. For millennia hunting bands vied with their neighbors over resources and territory. But physical distance generally limited the damage done by these rivalries. Unfortunately this is no longer the case. Technology has knit billions of people together ever more closely. **Disdain for ‘the other’ is a trait we can no longer afford.** Fortunately social science now provides us with tools through which people can appreciate the values and behaviors of others. The work of Empathetics is already expanding interculturally in hospitals in South Africa and the United States. Given the rise of ethnic hostility throughout the world, this may well be the most important future frontier for Empathetics.”



(Continued on p. 2)

promotion for children. Riess relayed how MacCormack, after attending one of her empathy workshops at MiddCORE, was in awe at her success at teaching empathy.

MacCormack's strong belief in Riess's work, which he called a "huge idea," led him to connect Riess with the initial investors of Empathetics Inc. She refers to MacCormack as an "Empathetics Champion."

Riess describes the impact of Middlebury, and its opportunities for connection, on her career trajectory. In 2013, for example, Riess presented her findings on empathy on the **TEDxMiddlebury stage**, reaching an audience of over six-hundred and fifty thousand YouTube viewers. "Without the TedTalk and without Charlie," she noted, "I don't think we would have Empathetics." She went on to laud the power of MiddCORE, calling it part of the "**magic of Middlebury**," where students are introduced to incredible minds from all over the globe, "creating all kinds of new possibilities."

Riess's work may be more important than ever, given the strain that COVID-19 is placing on health care systems against a backdrop of increasing social divisions. More power to you, Helen Riess and Empathetics!

Sam Byrne

When asked about his time at Middlebury thus far, Sam Byrne grinned widely, and, with enthusiasm, relayed it has been a "joy" to have the opportunity to teach public health at the undergraduate level. Byrne is an **assistant professor of biology and global health**, entering the Middlebury community this fall as one of nine new tenure-track faculty members. Byrne comes from St. Lawrence University, where he taught in the Department of Environmental Studies. He received his BA from Hampshire College and obtained an MS and Ph.D. during his studies at the University of Albany School of Public Health. He continues to teach Principles of Epidemiology in the Spring, after the class's debut this past Fall.

Byrne first became interested in **the relationship between human health and environmental factors** while studying for his undergraduate degree at Hampshire College. So interested, that he ended up designing his own major: a conglomerate of health, environment, and culture studies that he labeled as the study of "human ecology." Byrne remembered "trying to get



at the health of a population in a bunch of different ways" before he even realized the concept of public health was a specified field.

After earning his BA, he "randomly moved to Alaska," finding work at the non-profit **Alaska Community Action on Toxics**. He worked on toxic substance exposures in indigenous communities, where he learned how to **identify and mitigate risk in rural, indigenous communities**. This all cascaded, he recalled, into the realization that he needed to refine and develop these practices at graduate school. As he progressed through his studies at the University of Albany School of Public Health, he continued to work with these Alaskan communities, focusing on the **decreasing safety of traditional foods due to pollution**. Byrne took pride in

Club Spotlight: *GlobeMed at Middlebury*

Middlebury's chapter of GlobeMed, a club that emphasizes the importance of addressing global health inequities, and understanding social determinants of health and their impact on the wellbeing of individuals and communities, was founded in 2008. Since then, the club's impact continues to grow. Just recently, GlobeMed established a new partnership with **Conservation Heritage-Turambe**, an orga-

nization that advances initiatives to support the **health of individuals in the Musanze District of Rwanda**.

Outside of their partnership work, GlobeMed members engage in weekly "Global Health University" discussions, where topics such as the accessibility of abortion care, migrant justice initiatives, and COVID-19 vaccine distribution inequities are presented, and conversed about.

Additionally, GlobeMed engaged the Middlebury community in a variety of activities, including a "Finals Care Package Sale," whose profits supported their partner organization Conservation Heritage-Turambe; an apple picking event at Happy Valley Orchard, donating all apples that were picked; as well as collaboration in the World AIDS Day Festival at the end of December.

his research team's approach in Alaska, where they prioritized these communities' "goals, fears, and desires." Instead of focusing on the traditional route of solely "getting a publication," Byrne remembered his team's ability to "meaningfully incorporate" the people being affected by the studies. The Global Health program is benefitting from Prof. Byrne's experience with this type of research, known as **Community-Based Participatory Research, which represents the gold standard for equitable and ethical engagement of the community** under study in the research process.

When asked about how his educational and work experience has helped shape his understanding of the current COVID crisis, Byrne states that in many ways, "it's a textbook pandemic" in the virus's progression and adaptation to our behavior. However, he never could have predicted the pushback to "vaccination and basic public health measures," citing that almost all models of pandemics before this "assumed that we would be much better" at these interventions. Byrne concluded that we have a lot of work to be done in "building basic trust in public health infrastructure."

At Middlebury, Byrne emphasized **the uniqueness of the college's strong foundation in public health, noting that that "doesn't exist in a lot of places, especially at the undergraduate level."** He shares that it's particularly fitting at a liberal arts institution, as global

health studies is a "crazy mishmash" of all kinds of skill sets, and is **fundamentally interdisciplinary.** Since arriving, he's loved interacting with the students of Middlebury – wowed by their constant engagement, interest, and genuine presence in the classroom. He's been surprised, he remarked, "by the level of engagement," where students are always having that "next question."

Reflecting on the Global Health department's potential for evolution in years to come, Byrne says that there is both the student demand and a general consensus within the department to **build Global Health into its own major** at Middlebury over the long term. He claims that the department is building both the "momentum and the pieces" to attain this, while adding that achieving this goal is still years away.

Byrne is looking forward to fulfilling his research plans in the future at Middlebury. **He has received a research grant award to continue studying the environmental health of indigenous communities in Alaska, particularly in the frame of military contamination.** He adds that this could be a **potential opportunity for student involvement** "once the data comes in," he noted, with fingers crossed. Additionally, Byrne commented that this summer he hopes to explore the effects of fish consumption advisories that have been placed on the Hudson River fish declared "contaminated enough to

pose a cancer risk." Byrne started building this research idea a couple of years ago, when preliminary research found that the "regulatory structure isn't working."

Finally, Byrne mentioned that "there are a ton of great **opportunities to do epidemiology on publicly available data.**" He underscored how there are "so many cool questions" to explore, and that he would be happy to work with students on this research pursuit. Global Health students have already expressed appreciation for Byrne's teaching and expertise, and are thrilled to have **epidemiology – the core methodology of public health – offered regularly as an undergraduate course.**

Campus Event Spotlight: **Global Health Challenges Webinar Series**

A silver lining of remote learning has been the opportunity to engage faraway speakers over Zoom and/or increase the accessibility of College events to a wider audience. The **Rohatyn Center for Global Affairs'** webinar series, **Global Health Challenges**, began in September of 2020 and has featured topics such as **global health governance, economic impacts of pandemics, environmental aspects of COVID-19, the effects of COVID-19 on routine immunizations, and school-based health promotion**, with more events planned through spring of 2022. Recordings of these and many other great events can be found at the Rohatyn Center's events calendar web page.

"At its core, **CBPR questions the power relationships that are inherently embedded in Western knowledge production**, advocates for power to be shared between the researcher and the researched, acknowledges the legitimacy of experiential knowledge, and focuses on research aimed at improving situations and practices."

– M. Tremblay et al (2018)

Community-Connected Project Work

Two Vermont-based public health organizations, **RiseVT** and **NEKProsper!**, are benefitting from work done by students in the Global Health core class (GHLT 0257). The collaboration was facilitated through **Middlebury Liberal Arts in Action** (see blue box on this page). Students were split into six groups, three per organization, to tackle challenges identified last summer through conversations between instructor Pam Berenbaum and the program directors at the two organizations. Through this community-connected learning, **organizations get some much-needed help with research, information-gathering, analysis, and graphics, and the students get “real-world” experience and insights into the obstacles and opportunities of public health practice.**

NEKProsper! Is an Accountable Health Community (AHC) in the Northeast Kingdom area of Vermont: it is a multi-stakeholder partnership formed as a set of cross-sector Collaborative Action Networks (CANs) that work on one of **NEKProsper!’s visions: that everyone in the community is “mentally healthy, well housed, financially secure, well nourished, and physically healthy.”** Students gained insight into the complex management task that is an **accountable health community.** The NEKProsper! student groups conducted stakeholder interviews, summarized them, and researched outcome measures to assess the population health impacts of NEKProsper!’s work. Students working on NEKProsper! also gained insights into the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and of

growing income inequality as they heard about the challenges faced by partner organizations.

RiseVT is the lead primary prevention arm of **OneCare Vermont**, an accountable health organization led by health care providers with the goal of implementing **value-based care that emphasizes health promotion rather than disease remediation.** Within RiseVT’s work, the Addison County-based Dinner Together program was the subject of the Global Health students work. Dinner Together was born from a finding in the national **Youth Risk Behavior Survey:** that children and youths who have dinner together regularly with their families are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as illicit drug use. Students helped the Dinner Together program director to unpack this phenomenon by **researching the social forces behind these protective effects as well as the reasons why some families may not be able to cultivate as much togetherness as they would like.** One group developed infographics and social media images to increase Dinner Together’s reach, and another group researched the many different ethnic groups and nationalities among Vermont’s newest citizens, along with their food-related cultural practices.

These community-connected projects required students to engage with high-level public health promotion strategies and to embrace the complexities of promoting health through collaboration and public engagement. Prof. Berenbaum is proud of her students, who rose to the task with enthusiasm and commitment.

Students Contribute to Local Health Assessment

During the 2021 spring semester, Prof. Pam Berenbaum engaged a program organized by the Center for Community Engagement (CCE): Community-Connected Project-Based Learning (CCPBL) teaching assistants. CCE has created a sort of matchmaking service, called **Middlebury Liberal Arts in Action**, a web portal through which faculty members and community partners can collaborate. The faculty member identifies learning goals that fit within a course, creating project work that serves organizations’ needs. The CCPBL project work is aided by a **teaching assistant trained by CCE.**

Prof. Berenbaum had been a member of the 2021 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) Core Team since September, an effort was led by the University of Vermont Health Network’s Porter Medical Center in Middlebury. The CHNA is a federal requirement of all non-profit health care providers, and is used to determine **health promotion strategies for the next three years.**



Middlebury's Response to COVID-19

a look back at 2020



January

January 24, 2020

Increase of COVID-19 cases noticed in Wuhan, but other Chinese cities are regarded as having “smaller numbers,” and no travel restrictions.
 “Currently, there is a CDC Level 3 warning (avoid nonessential travel) for Hubei Province, China.”
 — For individuals arriving on the Middlebury or Monterey campuses from abroad

February

February 5, 2020

Visitors who traveled in China prior to February 3 are asked to delay visiting Middlebury until February 17.

February 18, 2020

All students studying in China return to Middlebury campus, symptom free.

March 5, 2020

Description of impending news of COVID-19 spread as “unsettling.” No cancellation of spring break trips at this time.
 — **Coronavirus: Guidance and Update**

March 8, 2020

First case of COVID-19 declared in VT.

March 10, 2020

Middlebury extends spring break, and declares remote classes for the week to follow.

March 11, 2020

Middlebury announces remote instruction for the remainder of the spring semester. Students must leave campus by March 15, at 5:00 PM.

March

March 12, 2020

Visitors are prohibited on campus. Additionally, Middlebury Schools Abroad in “France, Germany, Spain, Russia, Morocco, Japan, Jordan, and India” cancel their programs.
 — **March 12 Update for Schools Abroad Students**

March 13, 2020

Virtual “Student Town Hall,” led by VP Jeff Dayton-Johnson, is conducted to communicate Middlebury’s decisions in response to COVID-19.

March 16, 2020

Study abroad students have option to take all courses on a Pass/D/Fail grading metric.

March 18, 2020

First case of COVID-19 declared in Addison County.

March 25, 2020

Office of Digital Learning and Inquiry (DLINQ) distributes resources to students for transitioning to online learning.

April 2, 2020

In-person spring Commencement cancelled, moved to virtual format.

April 7, 2020

Middlebury College employee tests positive for COVID-19.

April

April 17, 2020

Middlebury students have option to take all courses Credit/No-Credit.

May*May 19, 2020*

Students are asked not to travel back to the Middlebury campus for any in-person celebrations. Safety protocols are reiterated.

May 22, 2020

Belongings pick-up time slots announced for June 3-17. Students returning for the Fall semester must wait until September 8.

June*June 22, 2020*

Middlebury decides to re-open for the Fall semester.

July*July 10, 2020*

All NESCAC competitions are cancelled for 2020 fall athletics.

July 21, 2020

All study abroad programs are cancelled for the Fall 2020 semester.

August*August 20, 2020*

Middlebury announces COVID-19 testing results from the beginning of the Fall semester. From August 18 and 19, "284 tests [were] taken, zero were positive, 279 were negative, and five had an insufficient sample result and will be retested today."

— COVID-19 Testing Results

September*September 3, 2020*

One student tests positive for COVID-19.

September 17, 2020

Phase 2 initiated: students allowed into Addison County; gatherings limited to 10 students or less (unless approved by Event Management)

September 23, 2020

Available indoor dining announced.

September 28, 2020

One employee tests positive for COVID-19.

October*October 8, 2020*

J-Term announced to be in virtual format, from January 19-February 12. NESCAC winter athletics are cancelled.

October 30, 2020

Middlebury acknowledges COVID-19 fatigue, but shares Vermont's surge in cases.

November*November 12, 2020*

Mandatory campus quarantine announced, starting November 13, 6:00 PM.

November 17, 2020

Two new positive cases of COVID-19 announced.

November 18, 2020

Additional positive COVID-19 case declared.

December*December 23, 2020*

Spring 2021 arrival instructions announced: mandatory 14-day quarantine, flu shot requirement.