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School of Nursing alumna on frontline of global battle to cure

Story by RACHEL HATCH



Simpson (*center*) is flanked by School of Nursing Director Donna Hartweg and IWU President Richard F. Wilson after receiving her nursing excellence award.

Mary Ellen Simpson '91 hoped her nursing degree would help her make a difference in the world. She has fulfilled that dream while tromping through the bush in Ghana, investigating disease in the Gaza Strip and helping patients during mortar attacks in Iraq.

Simpson, who was honored as the 2008 Distinguished Alumna for Nursing Excellence at this October's Homecoming, is the director of the Program in Population and Community Health at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Peoria (UICOMP). She also researches and conducts studies

for the Illinois Department of Human Services, the Illinois Department of Public Health, the Centers for Disease Control and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration and also teaches classes on preventive health and epidemiology.

As a nurse and epidemiologist, Simpson studies the health and illnesses of populations and policies to help those populations eradicate disease. "I gained my appetite for public-health nursing while I was at Illinois Wesleyan," says Simpson, who took a community health nursing class with now retired Associate Professor of Nursing Margaret Tennis. "Professor Tennis called me into her office and asked me if I had thought about graduate school. She said I had a talent for public-health nursing, and it was amazing to hear that. She was the catalyst who inspired me."

Simpson knew she wanted to be a nurse since her teens, when she worked as a Candy Stripper and hospital aid. She pursued that dream while raising her three children and taking classes at Lakeview College of Nursing, becoming a registered nurse in 1984.

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in nursing and science from Wesleyan in 1991, Simpson took Tennis' advice and went to the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she received her master's in public-health nursing in 1993. In 1998, she earned a doctorate in

nursing health promotion at the University of Missouri–Columbia and that same year won a highly competitive post-doctoral fellowship at the Centers for Disease Control.

“They usually only award fellowships to doctors,” says Simpson, “so it was a great honor when I was chosen.” For the next three years, she served as an epidemic intelligence service officer, working with groups such as the Carter Center, which sent her to Ghana to help investigate and eradicate disease caused by the guinea worm parasite, which infects drinking water. “I went from home to home in the bush, talking with people, with the health-care workers there and helping them formulate and implement a national plan to eliminate the disease,” she says. The results were spectacular: in three years, incidents of the disease had decreased 81 percent.

She also journeyed to the Middle East, assisting the United Nations Relief Works Agency in testing and investigating widespread anemia affecting people in the Gaza Strip. “It took almost a year to tabulate the results, but when we did, the U.N. started to fortify the wheat flour shipments to the area,” says Simpson.

Simpson’s international experience is augmented by her service as a medical officer in the U.S. Army Reserves, Army Nurse Corps, where she has achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel. “My father was a career military man, joining the Army Air Corps during World War II,” she says. “I have always wanted to serve my country, and was so excited when I became a registered nurse. I knew I could help.”

In 2007, Simpson left her job at UICOMP to serve in Iraq as officer in charge of community health and chief of inspection control at 325th Combat Support Hospital in Tikrit. “I was the only infectious disease nurse for about 15,000 people,” she says.

Best known as the birthplace of Saddam Hussein, Tikrit was the scene of a number of insurgent attacks against occupation forces. “We were mortared on average three to five times a week,” she says. “I’m not sure how well I would have done if I had not faced living in rough conditions before, knowing the challenges of extreme temperatures and limited water.” During her time there, she instituted a surveillance system for cholera during an outbreak in northern Iraq and also tuberculosis, which is endemic in Iraq.

She returned home early from her tour when her father passed away in 2008, returning to her role at the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Peoria, where she oversees the curriculum and administrative duties for the program, as well as teaching second-year medical students. “The course I teach on public health is so important for them,” Simpson says of her students. “In medicine, they start learning on the molecular level and work up to the individual patient. A class like this gives students a perspective of population-based medicine with a community health and epidemiological focus.”

For Simpson, nursing has been her way of answering a calling to make the world a better place. “I knew I wanted to be a nurse ever since I was a volunteer Candy Striper at 14 years old,” she says. “To be able to help people, to know that what I do is making a difference. There is no greater joy in a job than that.”