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Illinois Wesleyan University

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Alumnus to Receive Top Nursing Honor

September 19, 2008

Mary Ellen Simpson

*Mary Ellen
Simpson*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Mary Ellen Simpson hoped her nursing degree from Illinois Wesleyan University would help her make a difference in the world. Since graduating in 1991, she fulfilled her dreams while tromping through the bush in Ghana, investigating disease in the Gaza Strip, helping patients during mortar attacks in Iraq and teaching future doctors the importance of public health in a community.

Her profession has drawn her around the globe and now it will bring her back to her alma mater. Illinois Wesleyan will honor Simpson as the 2008 Distinguished Alumna for Nursing Excellence on Saturday, Oct. 4 at the School of Nursing [Homecoming](#) Brunch and Awards Program. She will speak at the brunch on the topic of “Expanding Roles for Public Health Nurses at War, Home and Abroad.”

“I can say this award from Illinois Wesleyan is the pinnacle of my career,” said Simpson. “It affirms the idea that I have made a difference, even in small way. And that is the most rewarding thing I could have.”

Simpson is the director of Program in Population and Community Health at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Peoria. Along with her administrative duties to the college, she has been active in research and conducting studies for the Illinois Department of Human Services, the Illinois Department of Public Health, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration. She also teaches classes on preventive health and epidemiology for medical students.

Known as a nurse-epidemiologist, Simpson’s expertise allows her to study the health of populations, the illnesses that affect them and policies to help those populations eradicate disease. “I gained my appetite for public health nursing while I was at Illinois Wesleyan,” said Simpson, who took a community health nursing class with 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.”

After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan with a bachelor’s degree in nursing, Simpson attended the University of Illinois at Chicago where she received her master’s degree in public health nursing in 1993. She went on to earn a doctorate in nursing health promotion from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1998.

With her doctorate in hand, Simpson applied for a highly competitive fellowship at the Centers for Disease Control. “They usually only award fellowships to doctors,” said Simpson. “So it was a great honor when I was chosen.” From 1998 to 2000, she became an epidemic intelligence service officer and worked with groups such as the Carter Center, which sent her to Ghana to help investigate and eradicate Guinea Worms plaguing the nation. “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 said. 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,” said Simpson. “It was so exciting and rewarding to be part of that change.”

Simpson says her experiences overseas prepared her for an even greater challenge – as a medical officer in the United States Army Reserves, Army Nurse Corps. “We were mortared on average three to five times a week,” she said of her time in the Combat Support Hospital in Tikrit, Iraq. “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.”

Growing up in a military household, Simpson had no reservations about wanting to join. “My father was a career military man, joining the Army Air Corps during World War II,” she said. “I have always wanted to serve my country, and was so excited when I became a registered nurse. I knew I could help.” It was Simpson’s father who commissioned her in 1985. “He pinned his own rank pin on me,” she said. “In fact, every rank I have received, my father gave me his pin.” She now wears his lieutenant colonel pin.

In 2007, Simpson was assigned to be the officer in charge of community health and chief of infection control at the hospital in Iraq. “I was the only infectious disease nurse for about 15,000 people,” she said. “We looked after more than young soldiers at the hospital. We helped contractors, third country national workers and Iraqi civilians. We worked with all age groups affected by infectious and chronic disease .” During her time there, she instituted a surveillance system for diseases such as Cholera during an outbreak in northern Iraq and tuberculosis which is endemic in Iraq. She returned home early from her tour when her father passed away in 2008.

As a civilian, Simpson has been active in epidemiological research with the CDC. From 2002-2005, the CDC assigned her to the Illinois Department of Human Resources, where she served as the Illinois’ Maternal and Child Health Epidemiologist . Simpson has published and presented more than 30 papers and reports on public health during her career. She has received multiple awards for her work, including the Paper of the Year form the Midwest Association of Institutional Researchers and a fellowship from the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education with the Department of Energy.

Beginning in 2004, she began teaching at the University of Illinois-Chicago College of Medicine. In 2005, a director position opened up at the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Peoria. 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 said 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. Understanding the principles of disease transmission and mitigation of risk factors are the basis for community interventions and development of health policies that ultimately impact the health status of a community..”

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 said. “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.”

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