2008

School of Nursing alumna on frontline of global battle to cure

Rachel Hatch

*Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu*
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Story by RACHEL HATCH

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 Striper 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 UIUCOMP 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.”