**Why I Chose Public Health...**

UCO Public Health Program Student Testimonies

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**Donovan Cousan** - Being a Black man in America has been challenging to say the least. I have experienced discrimination, institutionalized racism, micro-aggressions, and inequities starting at a very young age. Growing up, I never knew my experiences had a name nor what they meant. However, I was always curious as to why my white counterparts were so well off and not just financially, but socially and environmentally. My interest in Public Health sparked once I became an undergraduate student at the University of Central Oklahoma. This is where I learned that some other Black men and women felt the same way that I did. For so long I suppressed my thoughts and feelings about the uncertainty of whether I was treated equally and fairly compared to others.

In summer 2019, I was selected by Morehouse College - Public Health Sciences Institute to participate in Project Imhotep, which is an eleven-week summer internship program supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Office of Minority Health and Health Equity (OMHHE). I had the honor of working with the Office of Policy, Planning, and Evaluation (OPPE) within the Center for Preparedness and Response (CPR). I researched the progression of the National Biodefense Strategy that was implemented in 2018. This experience was amazing; I was able to take a glimpse of public health policies and learned how they affected us as a whole. My love for public health grew tremendously from this opportunity by opening my mind to new concentrations.

I am pursuing a Master’s in Public Health to achieve the goal of changing the stigma and statistics surrounding lower socioeconomic communities. I plan to tackle health inequities by utilizing the upstream model and revamping unlawful policies that are in place. **I no longer want to see other Black boys growing up feeling out of place or Black men ridiculed by an unjust system. I will break the barriers that hinder individuals from not only living longer but living healthier and sustainable lives.**

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**Alexis Burris** - I was the first person in my family to attend college. When I first enrolled at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) my major was Nursing. However, I did not enjoy it as much as I thought I would. I finally decided to take a break from school because I was unsure of what I wanted to do. While I was taking a break, I became a certified nursing assistant. When I was ready to go back to school, I looked at the list of majors on the UCO website, and I came across Public Health. I did not even know what that field was so I did a google search “What is Public Health?” I discovered it is so broad, and Public Health is everywhere! Public Health is nursing assistants, dumpster trucks, vaccinations, the water we drink, and so much more. Public Health is what keeps everyone safe and healthy. That is when I decided to major in Public Health.

I selected The American Lung Association (ALA) as my internship site because I knew I would be making a huge difference in individual’s lives. When I researched all the amazing work that ALA was doing to improve lung health, it made my soul happy! They had support groups called Better Breathers Club for individuals diagnosed with any chronic lung disease and their caregivers. I lost my grandmother in 2009 from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. I can only imagine how much of a difference that group could have helped my family during our difficult time. Half way through my internship, I was offered a position as their Health Promotion Manager. I gladly accepted the position! **I get to do something I love everyday while working to improve lung health for the great state of Oklahoma.** In the future, I would like to further my career and get my Master’s in Health Promotion.
**Allisa Varughese** - Growing up, I have always had a passion for health and empowering others to live a healthier life. I thought the only career option for that passion would be the medical field, so I majored in biomedical sciences when I began my first year of college. As I continued with this major for another year (with many hours spent volunteering, shadowing, and working with physicians), I realized that my passion was not necessarily in that area. I was not sure where it was though since I was still interested in working with health for the betterment of the community. That was when a friend told me about Public Health. I had never heard of a Public Health major before, but I decided to look into it. Little did I know, Public Health was the exact field for me.

Throughout my time in the University of Central Oklahoma’s Public Health program, I have learned and grown so much as a future health professional. The classes taught in this program are very detailed, direct, and passion-driven to create a difference in our society’s health. There is not a single lesson taught that is not important for the field. Students are also provided with many opportunities to step outside of the classroom and go into the community to learn more about different health factors that affect the public’s health. I have gained awareness in the issues that the public faces today regarding health disparities, and I know that I am going to use what I have learned through this program in my future career. I want health equity for ALL individuals, regardless of their background. I want to see children and adults become more educated on their health choices. I want to see the environment become greener and less polluted. I want to see policies created and implemented that eliminate social injustices. **Overall, I want to see our country be healthier than ever before. These are dreams that are great to dream, but they need to be addressed and fought for. I want to be a part of this change, and I believe that this major was the perfect door to walk through to conquer them.**

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**Denny MedicineBird** - I am an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma and reside in Jones, OK with my family. We have two sons, and I currently work for the Southern Plains Tribal Health Board, Oklahoma Tribal Epidemiology Center in Oklahoma City. I am the Program Coordinator for the Wellness Around Traditional Community Health (WATCH). We are a nonprofit organization that supports and serves the 39 tribes in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. My program focus is with our children ages 3 to 5 years old in early childhood learning centers and clinics within tribal communities. We strive to enhance the health of our children by providing a familiar healthful message for the children while they are at school, with their family and when they make visits to the clinic. WATCH is a health and wellness program that is the first of its kind and we have implemented the program into 7 early child learning centers and 4 clinics among 3 tribal communities. I have learned that WATCH is the perfect opportunity for me to give something back to our Native American communities, and I am hopeful that the program improves the health of our children while eliminating many health disparities across Indian Country.

There are many reasons why I have chosen a career in Public Health. My passion for helping others began in my early childhood. Some of my first teachers were various members of my family. These teachers made a strong effort in teaching me how to take care of myself, show kindness to others and to always lead with a giving heart. **Family has been my fuel to continue with my education and pursue an education in Public Health. I would credit my rich ties to my Native American culture, military service, and education as to the reasons why I chose to finish my Bachelor’s degree in Public Health at the University of Central Oklahoma.** My educational journey here has given me much support and confidence. The educational experience has molded me into being a better servant leader and provided a way for me to give back to Native American communities. I encourage you to take advantage of all the resources and outreach that the Public Health program and staff have to offer. This fall, I am thrilled to begin the UCO MPH program in their inaugural class.

Hohou – Nea ese – Thank you! Best Wishes on your educational journey!
**Shelby Graves** - Growing up in rural Oklahoma, I both witnessed and experienced the challenges that accompany living in an area with limited resources. I left my hometown in search of a field that would allow me to truly embrace the idea, “Be who you needed when you were younger.” I found this path in the Public Health program at UCO, where I fell in love with the Public Health. The coursework, field experience, and close mentorship of this program afforded me the opportunity to expand my conception of health equity and social justice. I later earned my MPH from the University of North Texas Health Science Center.

I began my career in community health education as a Prevention Specialist in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. While facilitating evidence-based programs and engaging in community coalitions, I recognized a great need for systemic change to address challenges that impacted the classrooms I visited. My work eventually encompassed global health education and sustainable development projects with non-profits and NGOs, which brought me from Oklahoma to the East Coast. I now work as a Health Policy Analyst for a local health department in Maryland. Here I am working on projects to build healthier communities and to establish spaces where all residents, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status can thrive. Through public health, I am working to find what heals the broken systems within our communities.

**Kate Mohr** - I choose Public Health for many reasons. Most importantly, our world needs change. I experienced and observed far too many social injustices and felt called to do something. I faced many barriers when I decided to go to college. I was living in poverty, had dropped out of high school, and was a first generation college student. I started college with no real direction, and had no idea what Public Health even was. Luckily, I had support from mentors and friends who listened to my ideas and pointed me in the right direction. As soon as I started the Public Health program at UCO I knew I had found my calling!

The support I received at UCO was out of this world. Whether it was advice, giving me rides when my car broke down, or connecting me with financial resources for a new laptop and utility assistance, the professors in the KHS Department and the staff at UCO supported me the entire way. They were completely invested in my success and went above and beyond to make sure I achieved my goals.

UCO opened many doors for me. During my senior year, I was able to travel to Minnesota with a classmate and professor. We presented at a national conference on walkability in Oklahoma City. After graduation, I was accepted into some of the best Public Health programs in the nation - Columbia University, George Washington University, and University of Colorado. After much deliberation I accepted an offer from University of Oklahoma Health Science Center and will finish my degree in Health Promotion Sciences in December 2020.

I am an introvert who thrives when working on my own, but I also have a huge heart and only feel fulfilled when I am helping others. Public Health is the best of both worlds for me. I love that Public Health provides endless opportunities to make the world better. I worked with the Harvard Study of Legal Debt as a primary field researcher. Our research investigated the impact of court fines and fees. I interviewed people from the misdemeanor court to find out how their fines impacted their lives. I have also worked in mental health and suicide prevention, and am currently working in teen pregnancy prevention.

Working in Public Health is incredibly rewarding because our work has a large impact, making positive changes at the community level (rather than at the individual level like social work and nursing). I am forever grateful I found Public Health and the program at UCO.
**Thade Shell** - “How can I help as many people as possible?” This question was my primary motivation that pushed me into pursuing a degree in Public Health. Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, I knew I wanted to be part of a field that created a positive impact on people’s lives. I want to help as many people as I possibly can. Policy development, community outreach, and working with diverse groups are crucial to me. These aspects were in the forefront of how I made my decision to carve my path in Public Health, and they still fuel my passion to serve others.

Throughout my courses in the Public Health program at UCO, I gained an interest in City Planning. My Environmental Health class was the course that made me realize everything around us is Public Health. My professors encouraged me to interview city planners and understand how the two fields intertwine. After these interviews, I knew that I wanted to pursue City Planning as a Public Health profession. This fall, I am beginning a Masters in Public Administration – Urban Management. Without the incredible leadership and guidance of the outstanding professors, none of this would be possible. My advice to those who are thinking about starting the Public Health program at UCO would be, “Absolutely, go for it!” You can do anything in this field, and you will always have wonderful individuals by your side.