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Cheryl DeAguiar participated in HSHPS' Graduate Fellowship Training Program (GFTP) during the spring of 2011 where she was placed at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in Rockville, Md. HSHPS caught up with her to see what she's been doing since her time at SAMHSA and learned how public health came into her life.

When did you become interested in public health and Hispanic health issues?

About six years ago when I was enrolled as a graduate student at New Mexico State University's public health program. During this time I was also doing fieldwork for the New Mexico Department of Health's Office of Border Health. The combined experiences opened my eyes to many of the border health issues such as low health literacy, lack of access to general health services, especially culturally appropriate services, and a variety of additional socioeconomic factors that influence physical and behavioral health.

Did you have any models of Hispanic health professionals growing up? If so, who and in what ways did they influence you?

No, I did not have any Hispanic public health professional role models growing up. However, the absence of a role model helped to motivate me to pursue a career in public health in hopes of helping to pave the way for students with similar backgrounds.

Can you tell us a couple of things that you learned throughout your internship that surprised you? Made you angry? Motivated you?

During my training program, I attended a number of professionally geared workshops that focused on Hispanic health issues and gaps within the system. The experience helped enhance my interests in studying and improving public health services in underserved populations.

How has the program helped you move forward in your career?

The professional development and networking opportunities have greatly impacted my career. To this day I still use many of the skills I learned during the HSHPS training program to engage and relate to different audiences.

What project or projects you are you currently working on?

I currently provide management and research support for a number of projects within the applied research branch of the National Cancer Institute. I manage several projects, including the “2015 International Cancer Screening Network Meeting” and the “Person-Centered Assessment Resource.”

In terms of research, I’m involved with several studies, including a study on the potential cancer risks in certain American Indian and Hispanic populations associated with the radiation exposure from the Trinity bomb test in New Mexico. The project aims to assess internal radiation exposure based on dietary patterns and, in turn, determine if there is any association with cancer and other chronic conditions. In addition, I’m also involved with a study that analyzes the economic burden of cancer on specific populations in the US and a study that measures the impact of multidisciplinary cancer care on patient outcomes.

Where do you see yourself and your career going from here?

For the next few years, I plan to continue work within the field of cancer research. I hope to continue working on research projects that not only highlight the needs of underserved populations but also help to fill the service gap. Eventually, I would like to earn a PhD in Public Health Epidemiology.

What advice can you give to young people who may have an interest in Hispanic health or medicine/public health/health professions but are unsure of pursuing the field?

I recommend taking an introductory course in public health to get an overview of the potential careers one could pursue within the field. In my opinion, public health is really applicable to almost every industry – from cancer research to occupational health. Public health impacts everyone. The nation is going to need more trained public health professionals to cover the aging work force and to meet the demand of a growing population.