

# Maureen Lichtveld, MD, MPH

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Every summer, Maureen Lichtveld, MD, MPH, takes her students to her home country of Suriname, a small Dutch colony in South America, for a jolt of “reality.” Reality, according to Dr. Lichtveld, is confronting health problems outside of the classroom. It’s fuel to get motivated. It shapes decisions. Reality can be as big as a study abroad trip or as small as volunteering at a local health center or community clinic. Most of Dr. Lichtveld’s students decide to go into environmental health after they witness reality.

Reality hit Dr. Lichtveld as a 23 year-old physician caring for natives in the Amazon rainforest. She already knew at the age of 12 that she wanted to work in medicine. But public health didn’t become evident until her time as the youngest and first female physician working directly in the Amazon.

The experience was a game changer. She learned that peoples’ health is inextricably linked to the environment. She discovered that the historic burden of health disparities couldn’t be resolved in one way but required a “multi-pronged strategy.”

“I wanted to be where the people were,” she says. “Not necessarily in an academic environment. The guiding hallmark of my life has been to serve people.”

Dr. Lichtveld moved to the United States where she received her Master of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, School of Hygiene and Public Health, Environmental Health Sciences. She then began an 18-year career at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention where she led the agency’s extramural prevention research program, awarding cooperative agreements to HSHPS targeting critical Hispanic health issues and capacity building through fellowships.

It was in the early 90s when she started working with the founders of HSHPS. “Everyone was in growth mode [at the time] and CDC needed to fund and grow this Hispanic health workforce.”

Now it has come full circle for Dr. Lichtveld as she takes on her new role as HSHPS President. “I am given the opportunity of building up what I had been trying to do while on the outside from

several decades ago,” she says. “The organization is at a crossroads of focus. I’m really humbled and privileged to lead the organization through that new phase.”

Dr. Lichtveld serves on the editorial board of numerous peer reviewed journals including the American Journal of Public Health. She is also a consultant to the Institute of Medicine, is a member of the Association of American Medical College’s Advisory Panel on Medical Education and was twice chair, and is part of the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health’s Occupational and Environmental Health Council. Her primary post is at Tulane University where she is professor and chair at the Department of Global Environmental Health Sciences. She developed Tulane University’s Diversity and Inclusive Excellence Strategic Plan.

Despite her growing professional leadership appointments and research in environmental health and health disparities, Dr. Lichtveld insists she will always be a teacher. “Students inspire me. I derive a lot of my energy from my students,” she says.

She advises future health professions students to identify a mentor as early as possible. “We’re willing to have you ride on our coattails.”

And, not surprisingly, volunteer. Dr. Lichtveld was a nurse’s aid before she began medical school.

“Volunteer in a community that deals with a specific health problems. It changes your life in ways you can never learn sitting in a classroom.”

She adds: “It’s OK to be poor for awhile.”