Medical Students Head To Israel to Improve Global Health for Underserved Populations

BY MEIRELDEN PISIN

While the world is focused on the conflict in Israel and many are canceling or delaying travel to the area, 20 medical students from the U.S. recently ventured to the quiet city of Beer Sheva, in Israel’s Negev desert region. There, they will begin training for careers as physicians in the field of global health, with the goal of learning how to improve medical care for underserved populations throughout the world.

The students are beginning their first year of the Program in International Health and Medicine in collaboration with Columbia’s Health Sciences (BGU-CU M.D.), the first medical degree program specifically designed to train doctors for the practice of international health and medicine, a field that is rapidly emerging as an integral component of global stability and development.

The BGU-CU M.D. program is an innovative joint venture between Columbia’s Health Sciences Division and Ben Gurion University. The program’s curriculum encompasses humanitarian emergencies and relief medicine, refugee health, and preventive medicine for diverse populations. In addition to the basic medical sciences and clinical rotations taught in American medical schools, BGU-CU M.D. students also learn about cross-cultural medicine, healthcare economics, epidemiology, bio-statistics, nutrition, and environmental health. Incorporated within all of the BGU-CU M.D. courses is an emphasis on preventive medicine and population health.

“This program offers future physicians a one-of-a-kind opportunity to learn about cross-cultural medicine and global health, Israel’s Negev desert region is populated by immigrants from Ethiopia, North Africa, and the former Soviet Union, as well as indigenous Bedouin, so it is an excellent place for medical students to develop the skills they’ll need to work with populations beyond the industrialized world and in the United States,” said Richard J. Deckebach, BGU-CU M.D. program director and director of the Institute of Human Nutrition at Columbia.

Ben Gurion and Columbia joined forces in 1997 to address the growing need for physicians who understand the impact of factors such as economics, environment, religion and politics on the health of individuals as well as entire populations. Issues such as the re-emergence of infectious diseases, the rapid spread of chronic and lifestyle-related diseases beyond the industrialized world to developing nations, and the inability of governments and international health organizations to respond to international health crises in an era of rapid globalization gave rise to the BGU-CU M.D. program.

The first three years of the BGU-CU M.D. program are taught in English at Ben Gurion’s Joyce and Irving Goldman Medical School in Beer Sheva. During the fourth year, students may take up to five months of clinical electives at Columbia and a two-month externship is required in either India, Nepal, Israel, Ethiopia, Kenya or at an approved international site. Graduates will have the skills to treat individuals and the knowledge to prevent disease and promote health within different populations. They will be prepared to work equally effectively within governmental or non-governmental organizations or in multi-cultural societies like the United States. This May, the innovative program produced its first group of new physicians.

Currently, citizens of five countries are enrolled in the BGU-CU M.D. program. They hail from places as diverse as the United States, Rwanda, Kosovo and Tibet.

“Our students are an exceptionally mature and committed group. They have readily tackled setbacks, yet share a common commitment to improving global health,” says Carmen Manalis, the BGU-CU M.D. program director at Ben Gurion University.

Applications to the class entering in fall 2003 are now being accepted. For more information on the BGU-CU M.D. Program, visit the program’s website at http://cpcnet.columbia.edu/dept/bgcu-md/.

Student Films Selected for Prestigious Sao Paulo, Palm Springs and Telluride Film Festivals

BY KRISTIN STERLING

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arie Regan, SOA’03, received a Traveler grant at the age of 13. But when she went to Thailand as an exchange student she was so moved by international issues that she decided to put down her camera, and instead of filmmaking, Regan went on to work in an African literature publishing house in London, a Calcutta street clinic and a school for government ministers in Spain where she taught English.

She could not forget, however, her childhood passion, so in 1997, Regan enrolled in Columbia’s School of the Arts, where she wrote and directed the short film Traveler, about a 92-year old woman who feels the weight of a lifetime of restriction when her driver’s license is revoked.

The film goes on to twist the “mad movie” as the woman claims the word “afeto,” meaning affection and love as a filmmaker in a new city. The film portrays an elderly grandmother’s love affair during the days of Pancho Villa. Regan won audience awards at both festivals and a at a festival in Mexico.

“Both Sao Paulo and Palm Springs are huge short film festivals and it’s very rewarding to be chosen among so many other quality films,” says Regan. “Some say audience awards are the most significant for a director’s career because we are ultimately working for the audience. In this case, audiences from three different countries have liked it. This tells me that the story was able to break language and cultural barriers. This is the best reward I can think of.”

La Milpa has participated in eight festivals around the world since its premiere last March in Guadalajara, Mexico, and has won nine awards to date. The film has also been accepted in the Drama International Short Film Festival in Greece as well as international festivals in Chile and Mexico.

Regan and Riggen weren’t the only Columbia students to be recognized in Palm Springs. Sergio Umansky’s, SOA’03, Spanish language film, Aqui Iba el Himno—Here is the Anthem—took second place for student live action films over 15 minutes. The film follows two wealthy teenagers in search of marijuana in Mexico City and their run-in with rogue cops.

These three Columbia films were among nearly 300 selected for the Palm Springs festival from a record 1,400 entries worldwide. Palm Springs is the largest short film showcase in North America, known as a scouting ground for new filmmaking talent.

In addition to the screening at Palm Springs, Umansky and classmates Jonathan Lemond, SOA’03, and Kazuo Ohs, SOA’02, represented Columbia at the Telluride Film Festival, held over Labor Day weekend in Colorado. These classmates had the only student films from the United States to be accepted at this year’s festival. Like Sao Paulo, Telluride’s competition is for selection. The Telluride Film Festival focuses on the creative talents behind the films, offering access to them through panel discussions, seminars and post-screening questions and answer sessions.

In addition to Aqui Iba el Himno, Lemond’s silent film, Mudaemonor, was screened, as was Kazuo Ohs’ Student Academy Award-winning film For Our Man. Last spring these three films, as well as La Milpa were featured as part of the 15th annual Columbia University Film Festival.

The students agree that participating in a film festival is a great learning experience. “Whether or not there is an award in such a film festival you learn something,” Riggen explains. “You meet somebody, you watch other interesting films and you hear the audience reacting—or not—to your own.”