

Student Spotlight!

1. Tell us about yourself

My name is Cat Hartwell. I am a second year Global Health student with an interest in the intersection of public health and climate change.

Prior to coming to NYU, I worked as a producer of documentaries and non-fiction television for a little over a decade in New York City. Many of the programs that I helped create covered topics related to public health, such as harm reduction in relation to the opioid crisis, reproductive rights, bacteriophages as a possible treatment option for antibacterial resistance, and climate change. After years of working in that business, I felt a pull to become more directly involved in the subjects that I was covering, which is what ultimately led me to pursue an MPH. I am currently a branch editor for the NYU chapter of the Polygeia global health think tank, where I am co-leading a team writing a literature review on the relationship between air pollution and breast cancer in minority populations in the Bronx. I also serve as the project manager for the Applied Global Health Initiative lab, where I am wrapping up a project analyzing data surrounding water and sanitation access for health care facilities in Enugu State, Nigeria. As part of the lab, I will soon be helping our very own Zach Williams create a new Climate Change Task Force. Fun fact about me – I am getting married this year.



2. What do you like about public health?

I really love that public health is a very large umbrella, under which so many topics nest. My previous career in documentaries provided me the opportunity to jump from issue to issue, which suited me very well because I care about many different subjects. I think I am drawn to public health for the same reason, and I hope that future work allows me to continue to grow and expand my areas of interest.

3. Why are you interested in the field of emergency preparedness and response?

My interest in emergency preparedness and response is two-fold. First, climate change will increase the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, which unfortunately means more emergencies that need to be prepared for and will also need to be responded to. Second, I have personally experienced a fair share of emergencies – I lived in NYC in 2001 when 9/11 happened and when Hurricane Sandy struck the city in 2012; I was in the Philippines during two consecutive Typhoons in 2015; and earlier that summer, I was in the Amazon River Basin of

Peru with a small film crew caught in a mudslide following heavy rains. These experiences have led me to want to be trained in emergencies so that I can be of service.

4. Can you describe a project or experience that helped you in making a decision to pursue a career in this particular field?

In November 2018, I went to Johannesburg for a documentary project surrounding girls' education and menstrual hygiene management. During my time there, I spent a couple of weeks filming with two girls who left a lasting impression on me. The first was a 17-year old sex worker who lived in a one room house with her entire family of twelve. There was often not enough space on the floor for her to sleep. She shared an experience with a teacher surrounding menstruation that ultimately led her to drop out of school, which led her to seek sex work as a means to escape her circumstances.

The second was a 14-year old girl who was orphaned due to unknown circumstances, and who lived with her uncle and his family. Her environment was reminiscent of Cinderella, with the wicked stepmother to boot. This girl is brilliant at math and science and wants to be a doctor someday. As I got to know both of these girls, I just wanted to do what I could to help - which is theoretically against the rules of documentary filmmaking where one is supposed to be an impartial observer. This experience in Johannesburg amplified what I can only describe as a calling to do something more, and I couldn't ignore it any longer. A couple of months later, I applied to NYU SGPH.

5. Who do you consider to be vulnerable populations and why?

I think of vulnerable populations to be those at higher risk of harm, who need extra support or special care. Vulnerable populations can include very young children, the elderly, those with disabilities, people with co-morbidities or comprised immune systems, and people with low income.

6. What is a current emergency or disaster that you believe is critical to address?

It would be hard to think of any disaster more critical to address at this moment in history other than Covid – 19.

7. How do you handle stress and pressure?

I actually thrive under pressure. Whenever I'm in a situation where I hold a lot of responsibility, I am usually very focused and calm. I also like to crack jokes and keep a positive attitude to ease the tension of the team that I am with. I handle stress differently, however. Stress tends to manifest physically for me, and I manage it by exercising. When stressed, I try to go for a run or even a brisk walk to clear my head, or do anything I can to get my heart rate up and break a sweat.

8. If you could cure a disease which would it be and why?

Poverty. Technically, poverty is not a disease, but it is the driver of many diseases and health problems. Access to nutritional foods, clean water, safe housing, health services, education and job opportunities are major hurdles for much of the world's impoverished people. It is also

cyclical – poverty increases the chances of poor health, and poor health can result in poverty. If we can break the cycle of poverty, I believe we can improve health for millions of people.

9. Who is your favorite public health figure and why?

Jonathan Mann, who founded the Global Programme for AIDS at the WHO and later HealthRight International. Besides being a pioneer in AIDS research, Mann was an early advocate for the connection between health and human rights. He was also the founding director of the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard, which hits close to home for me because I had the chance to intern with FXB International over this past summer, and I really admire the organization's mission and values.

10. What is next for you after you complete your MPH degree?

I'm still not sure yet, but I would actually love to be involved in creating more equitable and forward-thinking public health policy here in the US, particularly when it comes to environmental justice and climate justice.