

Student Spotlight- Paola Torres!



1. Tell us about yourself

My family is from Tijuana, Mexico but I grew up in San Diego, CA. I was fortunate enough to go back and forth the international border and get the best of both worlds (family, food & culture from Mexico / education and security from the USA). I'm passionate about traveling, festivals, sailing and volunteering. My academic interests include food systems, emergency response, occupational health, climate change and the concept of one health.

2. What do you like about public health?

I love that public health focuses on prevention and seeing health as more than the mere absence of disease. This framework brings a more holistic lens to approach health problems. Also, I really enjoy working closely with communities to promote health and well-being.

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

The intersection between climate change and emergency preparedness and response inspires me to continue learning about this field. Changing weather patterns create the need to increase planning and mitigation efforts worldwide. We can't keep the same response frameworks when our planet is rapidly changing with our human activities.

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

I've had a range of experiences that guided me to pursue NYU's MPH in Environmental Health. During my undergrad I was fortunate enough to secure internships and research positions that allowed me to travel. I went to El Salvador to learn about climate change and food systems; I traveled to La Paz, Mexico where I learned about flooding, ecotourism, urban planning and civic engagement; and lastly, I continue to participate in an ongoing taskforce that seeks to address binational management of solid waste and flooding alongside the San Diego/Tijuana border. After I graduated UC Irvine, I joined AmeriCorps through the American Red Cross where I continued to learn about all these intersecting fields! Overall, these experiences helped me "connect the dots" and guided me to pursue this field.

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

Vulnerable populations are those who don't have access to resources or key social determinants of health. For the past 3 years I've worked with the YMCA to improve the health & safety of childcare programs. Children are among the most vulnerable in our society as they depend entirely on caregivers to fulfill their needs. Nationwide, children spend close to 40 hours per week in childcare! Considering their vulnerability, I've enjoyed making a difference by improving childcare environments to foster optimal development.

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

Climate change is on the top of my list. Many people don't think a half-degree increase is a big deal, but we need to consider that developing countries and poor communities will be most affected by this increase. Climate change threatens our existence, our food systems and natural resources. We also need to urgently address our consumption patterns and waste management, which are both culprits in increasing CO2 emissions. We need to be more conscious about the life cycle of our everyday products and stop consuming so much.

7. How do you handle stress and pressure?

Mindfulness practices through meditation and yoga. I can't control external things, but I can control how I react to them. Meditation has allowed me to push the limits on my mind and yoga on the body. The more I stretch and hold uncomfortable postures I build inner and outer strength, focus, and discipline.

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

I would cure neglected tropical diseases (NTD) which mainly affect the world's poorest people. Climate change is facilitating NTDs by allowing mosquitos, other insects and bacteria to thrive. It's scary to think that in the near future these bugs could become resistant to our antibiotics and it would be harder for us to treat and eradicate these diseases.

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

Currently, Greta Thunberg is a huge inspiration. She reminds us of the urgency of action and of taking matters into our hands. Many people think that our only tool against climate change is conscious consumerism, but we have to remember we are CITIZENS first and then consumers. As a community we have the tools to do so much more through - direct action, mutual aid, grassroots organizations and policy reform!

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

As of now I am on standby. I am absorbing new information and thinking how COVID19 will shift our workforce needs. I think environmental health and air quality will be the next big focuses in the world. I would eventually like to pursue a position at the UN but I am still exploring my interests and letting my next moment come out of the one I am currently in. I'm enjoying the journey.