

Student Spotlight!



L: On the way to Haiti with the team of Jamaican emergency responders in response to the Haitian 2010 earthquake; R: At base camp at the Haitian airport

1. Tell us about yourself

I am a public health physician from Jamaica, a proud graduate of the University of West Indies. After pursuing my bachelor's and medical degree, I worked for several years in the emergency departments of local hospitals where I treated patients with various ailments, helped train medical students and EMTs and compiled policy and treatment guidelines for various diseases. After completion of my MPH degree, I worked in the HIV/STI/TB department in the Ministry of Health as the Medical Officer in charge of technical guidance of the treatment response for HIV, STIs and TB; I oversaw the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV program and the revision of the TB prevention and treatment guidelines for Jamaica. I was also part of the EOC to provide technical guidance for HIV and other infectious diseases. I have been on sabbatical from that desk but continue to lecture students on emerging infections at the College of St Rose and the University at Albany in upstate NY as a guest lecturer for undergraduate classes.

2. **What do you like about public health?** I truly appreciate the collective focus of population health and primary prevention measures. Many health issues would be lessened or non-existent if there was a renewed investment in preventative aspects of health.

- 3. Why are you interested in the field of emergency preparedness and response?** I have worked in the emergency departments of hospitals for several years in Jamaica. I was the nerdy kid that read volumes of first aid books around my home. As an island, Jamaica is susceptible to earthquakes and hurricanes annually and I have been involved in emergency response, firsthand as a volunteer, then as a physician.
- 4. Can you describe a project or experience that helped you in making a decision to pursue a career in this particular field?** I launched into the public health track after my stint in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake. There was chaos during the first week following that disaster, in no small part due to the absence of leadership which later led to violence as people were literally fighting for their survival. I became interested in the preparation of my own country for large scale crises and was motivated by the impact of external partners who often came into the country with ideas of what the country did right or wrong. However well-intentioned their efforts are, I firmly believe that response efforts must be guided by local teams who are familiar with cultural norms and expectations.
- 5. Who do you consider to be vulnerable populations and why?** Vulnerable populations tend to suffer worse health outcomes due to lack of access to primary preventative measures such as basic healthcare or potable water. The vulnerability may differ in different contexts but is usually related to poverty. One example is the mortality rates among Blacks in the recent COVID-19 crisis in NYC who are vulnerable to higher rates of underlying conditions, such as diabetes.
- 6. What is a current emergency or disaster that you believe is critical to address?** I think our focus must be on managing the pandemic of COVID-19. Risk communication strategies are critical to bolster all other plans in the response effort. The mixed messaging in the US has left the public wary of public health advisories. Since we may be in this crisis for many months to come, there must be an effort to regain the public's trust in scientific data to combat the spread of this disease.
- 7. How do you handle stress and pressure?** I have learnt to do simple things like count to ten (smile). Daily exercise, prayer and positive thoughts (these are plastered on walls in my bedroom) help to relieve some stress.

- 8. If you could cure a disease which would it be and why?** Diabetes mellitus would be my first choice in finding a cure, as this has negatively impacted many members of my family.
- 9. Who is your favorite public health figure and why?** A local public health giant in Jamaica, Dr Marion Bullock-Ducasse, was the chief medical officer in the country for several years. She has a brilliant mind and led the technical policy unit with a firm hand. It was common to see her on television, delivering public health messaging but she was a powerhouse in the EOC command and policy decision-making realm. Most importantly, she always looked poised and professional with a keen fashion sense and never a hair out of place!
- 10. What is next for you after you complete this certificate?** Once I complete the certificate in disaster science and policy, I aim to blaze a trail in public health particularly in the areas of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. My focus will be in the planning and preparedness arena so that we are able to respond in a quicker and more efficient manner to these novel infections.