

April 06, 2010

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Recommended Citation

Kornwitz, Jason, "2010-04-06: Discovering a passion for healing the poor" (2010). *News@Northeastern*. Paper 554.
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20001797>

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Discovering a passion for healing the poor



Sam Laudano's experiential learning opportunity at South African hospitals convinced her to pursue a career as a doctor or physician assistant. *Courtesy photo*

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Testing blood samples, delivering babies and watching surgeons perform emergency operations on patients in hospitals in Cape Town, South Africa, gave Sam Laudano a glimpse of her life's calling.

"It was completely inspiring and absolutely life-changing," said Laudano, who graduated from Northeastern in January with a degree in **toxicology**. "It made me certain that this is exactly what I want to do," she added, noting that the summer-long experiential learning opportunity has encouraged her to pursue a career either as a doctor or a physician assistant.

Laudano connected with Children Family Health International to get the position with three hospitals in the South African city. The nongovernmental organization places health science students in global health education programs throughout the world.

At GF-Jooste Hospital, in Cape Town, Laudano drew blood, measured heart rates and performed EKG's on the severely impoverished and uninsured.

The harsh reality of budgetary restrictions imposes severe limits on testing for sick kids, expectant mothers and ailing elderly, Laudano said.

"Doctors tried to get as much information out of the physical exam as they could," she explained. "They won't order 10 tests just to rule out something."

She also watched severely wounded patients face surgery, vividly recalling the case of one victim who had a bullet extracted from underneath the skin of his thumb, and of another who wandered around the hospital with a knife embedded in his head.

Laudano marveled at the diligence of the underpaid, yet overworked doctors, and said she'd jump at the opportunity to work full time at a clinic in an impoverished foreign country.

"It was very inspiring to work with the doctors there," she said. "The essence of medicine is to help people who otherwise have no alternative."

At Eerste River Hospital, an antiretroviral drug clinic, Laudano tested blood samples and shadowed doctors who counseled patients and families who were coping with HIV/AIDS.

Many of the counseling sessions focused on safe sex practices and spousal therapy. "There is a ton of misinformation about AIDS," Laudano said. "And even if a woman wants to have safe sex, her husband might not believe in that."

Laudano also cleaned and weighed newborns at the midwife-run Macassar Day Hospital, an outpatient maternity ward.

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The overall experience transformed her understanding of the importance of becoming a health care professional. "It's about caring for people and making their lives easier in any way that you can," she said.

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