



YURI JADOTTE, MD, PHD STUDENT,
DULA PACQUIAO, EDD, RN, CTN, PROFESSOR, UMDNJ-SN,
AND SHARESE PORTER, MPH, CHES, PHD STUDENT

STUDYING CITY LIFE

Yes, it's complicated. Start by thinking socially, culturally, politically, economically, geographically, and bio-environmentally. You can't pursue one line of reasoning without the others. With backgrounds, advanced degrees and full-fledged careers already in public health, nursing, medicine, architecture, education, social work as well as administration, 60 doctoral students are capturing the essence of interdisciplinary education. What's at stake is the health and everyday life of the 222 million Americans who call a metropolitan area home.

Throughout the 2011-12 fall and spring semesters, Yuri Jadotte, MD, took the CHEN bus traveling a loop of city streets between the University Heights campuses of UMDNJ-School of Nursing (SN), New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) and Rutgers-Newark. This PhD student laughs easily about how many miles he logged going from one school to another and how different the cultures are at each stop.

Fellow student Sharese Porter, MPH, CHES, and their professor, Dula Pacquiao, EdD, RN, CTN, sit alongside Yuri at a conference room table and nod in animated agreement. "We are certainly a one-of-a-kind program," says Dula. (By the way, this is a program in which everyone, from full professors on down to first-year students, is on a first name basis, a fact of that was not only hard for Yuri as a new physician, but that we also found difficult to do as editors who

almost always refer to individuals as "Doctor" or by their last name in our copy. In this story, as you see, we bow to the Urban Systems' style.)

A 4:14 p.m. CHEN bus departing from Rutgers could get Yuri to UMDNJ by 4:26 or to NJIT by 4:37 with one stop on this regular route taking him as far as the train station by 4:46. Classes were all in the evening to accommodate his day-time work schedule and typically, he'd be on that bus between 4 and 5 p.m. and later heading home between 8 and 9 p.m. CHEN stands for Council of Higher Education in Newark, established back in 1971 to encourage collaborations among the four public institutions of higher education in Newark: UMDNJ, NJIT, Rutgers-Newark and Essex County College. This unincorporated association works well and has served as a force in the revitalization of the community bounded by Springfield Avenue/Market Street, Littleton Avenue, Orange Road and Halsey Street. The CHEN institutions have a combined daytime population of almost 50,000 and close to 35,000 of them are degree-seeking students like Yuri and Sharese, a public health educator who is at the dissertation stage of her PhD journey.

WORDS BY MARYANN BRINLEY / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN EMERSON



THROUGHOUT THE 2011-12 FALL AND SPRING

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A medical resident who intends to pursue dermatology as well as a research associate at the New Jersey Center for Evidence-Based Practice, Yuri earned his MD in 2010 from UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School (NJMS). The reason for all that local travel last year was his first year of core coursework in a unique 72 credit doctoral program, the PhD in Urban Systems that draws on the combined strengths of three universities: health at UMDNJ's School of Nursing, environment at NJIT's School of Architecture and education at Rutgers' School of Public Affairs and Adminis-

tration. Yes, doctors debate architects and educators show healthcare administrators what's really happening. Where else in the world would someone like Yuri with his medical background be able to follow the link to "how biology influenced the language of urban planning"? His professor at NJIT thought it was an amazing research project topic, and one that no one else would have proposed. "I'm hoping to get that paper published," Yuri says.

"During the first two years you have the most cross-pollination of all three campuses directly," Yuri explains. "In sub-

sequent years, I'll be collaborating with the different areas but I may not have to travel physically to all the campuses." Each school offers six credits of that core curriculum for a total of 18. After that, students stick closer to their fields of concentration. Yuri, one of just 16 students on the urban health track, actually carries three school IDs: one for UMDNJ, one for NJIT and one for Rutgers. And, they come in handy because on any given day this student could be anywhere in Newark, the rich multicultural city that provides a natural laboratory for students who want to do this kind of cross-disciplinary research and, in

the long run, make a difference in complex, challenging, urban areas.

"This lack of hierarchy is just one of the secrets here," explains Dula, the UMDNJ professor who is the coordinator of the PhD in urban health. "It's a real cultural change from medicine and all of health care, in fact. We are very comfortable in our informality and very collegial. Students should feel at ease approaching faculty or arguing a point. This is what I believe a PhD program should be all about and this program is very visionary. It began back in 2001 and we have integrated the three areas and three schools so well now." Even the diploma at graduation is awarded by all three universities. Graduates go on to be employed as faculty, researchers, program planners, policy developers, and administrators in education, health care, government, and public health agencies.

"Everyone, no matter what track you are in, works towards social justice," says Sharese, an educator with Rutgers Cooperative Extension, the community-based outreach and research arm of their School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. "Whether we are designing a building, teaching, developing a curriculum or working as health practitioners, we incorporate social dynamics. Health is not just based on an individual's behavior. In fact, one of the features of the program is that we always look at those social reasons for illness and disease as well as the environment and the individual."

Sharese, who is in her fourth year, was born and raised in Newark and has always gravitated to urban environments so, for her, finding this multi-faceted graduate program was "magic. I fit right in here. This program has really allowed me the flexibility to create my own particular path and interact with the faculty not only here at UMDNJ but at Rutgers and NJIT." Her job with Rutgers sends her out into multiple counties statewide, including the Newark community, which dovetails perfectly with her studies. "I am doing a lot of work around town now on childhood obesity and I've had practical experience in public health but I needed to build more skills to do research."

Sharese treasures the interdisciplinary nature of this five-year program and has watched how students interact and teach one another. "Our group is really outspo-

ken. We are definitely advocates and it really does take this combination of disciplines, experiences and backgrounds to help us understand the complex connections in an urban world." For her dissertation, she is addressing the influence of racial residential segregation on the life course and health of black immigrants. "I want to focus on how a neighborhood affects health."

Yuri jumps in to agree. "Health can't just be a matter of telling a patient, 'You smoked, therefore you've got lung cancer.' There are so many steps in between if we really look carefully at people and not simply blame them." Born in Florida, Yuri spent much of his childhood in Haiti, where his parents were from. Eventually, he returned to the U.S. when he was 15 for high school, college and then medical school. "One of my parents lived through the devastating earthquake in Haiti and is still down there. I remember thinking, 'I want to do something about this, to change the environment there or to make sure it can't happen in another urban situation.' So many people died or were injured in Haiti because of the way urban systems were designed. I want to be in a position if I am ever in any similar situation to be able to say, 'This is what we should do.'" And while dermatology may be his clinical interest, he explains that "any disease, particularly infectious and allergic diseases, fits spatial patterns and can be distributed in certain geographical ways. Few have looked at the socio-economic and geographic aspects of dermatology."

Karen Franck, PhD, at NJIT, is the overall director of the Urban Systems program, and she coordinates the environment track. At Rutgers, Alan Sadovnik, PhD, manages the urban educational policy specialization. Karen believes that "urban problems are multifaceted and cannot be understood or solved within the confines of an individual discipline." So, students are "expected to acquire an appreciation of issues related to urban environment, health and education." Some, according to Dula, actually move from one track to another track as their careers take shape. Faculty members from all three universities meet regularly and work together. At UMDNJ, Dula also holds monthly meetings and invites SN

professors outside the program because "I want to filter information to everyone, so they understand the program and can participate in dissertation committees."

Dula explains, "It has been a big responsibility to get these three huge university administrations working together. In medicine and with the growth of all health-related professions, there is always a lot of turf protection." Specialization, in nursing and all the allied health fields, is the norm. Meanwhile, those in the social sciences are way ahead in realizing that collaboration between specializations are keys to success. "You can't study anthropology without sociology, or art without history," says this nurse educator.

For her own doctorate in education at Rutgers she majored in anthropology but had to be prepared to teach in three specialties so she opted for sociology and history as well. The former director of graduate education at Kean University, Dula was thrilled to come to UMDNJ in 2005 to teach in this PhD program. "I've always been interested in the social determinants of health and it's all coming together now. There is a big push in health care today to look at health and not just disease. While we may be good at helping people after they are sick, we have not been good at promoting health. We've got to address those behaviors that keep people healthy before they get sick." In nursing, there has been too much emphasis on patients as individuals and not enough on populations. "Let's talk about why some groups are more or less healthy than other groups. Let's talk about class and environmental issues and discrimination. Think about it, your health has so much to do with education, income and access to care."

At conferences she attends now, Dula can't help but smile about the Urban Systems PhD. "Everybody is talking about inter-professional doctorates but we've been doing it for years here. It's very exciting." ■

Other faculty who teach in the Urban Systems Program are: Barbara Caldwell, PhD, APN-BC; Huey-Shys Chen, PhD, RN, CHES; Tony Forrester, PhD, RN; Daniel Gundersen, PhD; Frances Munet-Vilaro, PhD, RN; Melanie Percy, PhD, RN, CPNP, FAAN, FAANP; Rula Wilson, DNSc, R.