

Dr. Hendrikson Honored as “Champion of Change”

By Matthew J. Newman

For Dr. Edward Hendrikson, the approach to sustainable community health is to “...not be selfish of your wants and your needs, but to incorporate your needs and wants into the community.” He says further, “And that way, you’ll solve the community’s problems rather than add to them.”

It’s a strategy that’s proven worthwhile, as the White House recently acknowledged Dr. Hendrikson’s lifelong commitment to community service by declaring him a “Champion of Change,” as a part of a special series honoring and profiling Americans who have performed work to “out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world.”

I had the privilege of talking to Dr. Hendrikson while working on a project to interview Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) associated with Community HealthCorps, NACHC’s health-based AmeriCorps program. His exceptional story is exemplary of a life devoted to helping the underprivileged.

Dr. Hendrikson started his career in community service during his two Peace Corps tours: Lesotho from 1975 to 1976 and Swaziland from 1980 to 1982. He and his wife Leslie served together – he as a math and science teacher, and she as an English teacher. Facing an HIV/AIDS pandemic and prevalent health needs in the country, the Hendriksons decided that they needed to do more. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, they took on the task of writing a book to help communities prevent disease and stay healthy. Dr. Hendrikson wrote the text while his wife illustrated and compiled the book, “To Your Health: An African Family’s Guide to Good Health, Safety and First Aid.” Published as a series in the Swaziland Times, it was subsequently adopted by the Swaziland government as part of a larger educational curriculum for distribution to at-risk communities.



Dr. Hendrikson’s community service did not end with the Peace Corps. His experience in Africa stirred within him a desire to pursue a health career and give service to America’s own medically underserved. Holding a Doctorate of Environmental Health, as well as serving as Director of Environmental Health and a Physician Assistant at the Plan de Salud del Valle Community Health Center

in Colorado, Dr. Hendrikson has been working in migrant and community health for over 30 years. “Working with farm workers and new immigrants is just as rewarding as being a volunteer in Swaziland,” says Dr. Hendrikson.

At the Colorado center, Dr. Hendrikson enjoys mentoring Community HealthCorps members who are part of the larger AmeriCorps program. He is always ready to share his experiences with young people, with an eye to inspiring others to keep the flame of community service burning. Dr. Hendrikson returns to Swaziland annually to monitor the orphanage he set up in his Peace Corps host community, and collect vital health information for the United Nations. Also, he collaborates with the

National Association of Community Health Centers in efforts to address unmet health needs in the U.S. as well as globally.

Having served in the Peace Corps myself, I find it reassuring that Dr. Hendrikson is among many former Peace Corps Volunteers who continue to serve their country in the interests of humanity. He is illustrative of the potential that RPCVs can have in helping at-risk communities at home and abroad, and as leaders in the fight for universal health care access.

The White House video featuring Dr. Hendrikson can be found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/champions/peace-corps/edward-hendrikson>.

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