

# **SIUE public health students live mission to shape a changing world during inaugural travel study to Uganda**

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EDWARDSVILLE - "Travel study programs can change a person's life forever: personally, academically and professionally."

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Assistant Professor of Public Health Michelle Cathorall, DrPH, MPH, stands by her statement wholeheartedly having witnessed such a transformation as she accompanied eight public health students on a five-week travel study in eastern Africa.

The international service experience left an indelible mark on all involved as students worked in local Ugandan neighborhoods, helped develop programs to address issues of malaria and HIV, and advanced life skills like enhanced communication, gratitude and patience.

“Being in Uganda, working in the rural communities, while also experiencing what it is like to be a Ugandan university student, I discovered a passion for dedicating my life to sharing my public health education with the world,” said Chelsea Franklin, of Greenville, who participated in the travel study before completing a bachelor’s in public health in August. “The most impactful part of my experience was realizing that there is nothing else in the world that I want to do more.”

The humbling realization of the importance of selflessness and self-confidence was shared by numerous students during their travels.

“The trip allowed my heart and brain to grow, and made an everlasting impact on me,” said Mica Coleman, of Pawnee. Following the summer program, Coleman achieved her bachelor’s in public health. She is now pursuing a master’s in public administration and policy analysis, concentrating in human safety, at SIUE.

The travel study program was made possible through a long-term partnership with Ndejje University in Uganda. It offered students the unique opportunity to work with diverse communities, an integral learning component of their preparation as future public health leaders, according to Cathorall.

“I was able to apply classroom knowledge and skills while completing fieldwork at Ndejje University,” Coleman recalled. “I learned more about myself and where I see myself in the future.”

“One of the challenges of training the next generation of public health leaders is helping them develop a global perspective on public health issues and on how to work with those diverse communities to understand and address their health needs in appropriate ways. That’s why experiences like this are essential for our students.”

Cathorall noted the SIUE students' personal and professional development as they completed community fieldwork and learned to communicate in a productive and meaningful way with Ugandans.

“Students who were quiet in class blossomed, taking on leadership roles during the trip,” she explained. “I watched students change the way they think about situations, from their perspective being the “right” or “normal” one to recognizing that our cultural perspective is not always the right one and that when there are issues or disagreements, each person plays a role.”

“As a professor, there is a sense of pride and professional fulfillment in developing a program that has the power to transform a person's life by helping them see the broader picture of life in another country and to change how they view themselves, their country and culture,” Cathorall added.

While in eastern Africa, the students also learned a new sport, woodball, and competed in a tournament at the National Stadium. They also explored an island that has been turned into a chimpanzee sanctuary, and visited a local government hospital where they learned about the healthcare delivery system's challenges and improvements. The finale of their trip included a five-day safari tour.

After a successful inaugural trip to Uganda, Cathorall anticipates this is the first of many travel study programs to the African country.

“To other students considering participating in a future trip, I would say definitely do it,” said Mikayla Colenburg, of St. Louis, a senior studying public health. “This trip presented so many benefits and allowed me to grow as a person and see my major in action. I hope to travel more in the future, so that I can see all the world has to offer.”

The [SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior](#) prepares students in a wide range of fields including public health, exercise science, nutrition, instructional technology, psychology, speech-language pathology and audiology, educational administration, and teaching. Faculty members engage in leading-edge research, which enhances teaching and enriches the educational experience. The School supports the community through on-campus clinics, outreach to children and families, and a focused commitment to enhancing individual lives across the region.