

## Alumna Spotlight

**Barbara Staggers, M.D., M.P.H. '80, F.A.A.P.**

*"I had an epiphany at 18," says **Barbara Staggers**, director of the adolescent medicine division at Children's Hospital and Research Center in Oakland, California, and codirector of the hospital's Health Professions Internship Partnership (also called FACES for the Future). "I was working with a 14-year-old in a summer program. A pimp came to get her out of the program, and the program director said, 'You can't take her. We have to have parental consent.' The pimp got on the phone, called the mother, and the mother said, 'Let her go. We need the money.' I never saw that 14-year-old again, but I'll never forget her."*

Staggers, who was awarded this year's Peter E. Haas Public Service Award (see page 38), has volunteered much of her professional and personal life to improving health care for adolescents and is considered a national authority on high-risk youth, urban and minority youth, violence, and health care issues of multicultural societies.

She served for six years on the National Committee on Adolescence for the American Academy of Pediatrics, for which she helped to develop the pediatrics residency training guidelines in adolescent health care. She is a member of numerous advisory boards and is a consultant for the California State Assembly, the State Senate, and the National Congressional Black Caucus for development of health policy for adolescents.

But it is through work closer to home that she leads by example. Under Staggers's direction, the adolescent medicine division at Children's Hospital has designed cutting-edge development programs for high-risk youth based on a philosophy that embraces youth empowerment.

Faces for the Future, a three-year internship program launched in 2000, partners with local health academies, colleges, universities, medical schools, and residency programs to introduce underrepresented minority high school students to the health professions. It assists them in getting into educational programs of their choice, and equips them with the necessary personal skills to succeed in these and other demanding pursuits. Of the first graduating class, 92 percent started college, and more than half entered directly into four-year institutions.

Another successful innovation was to establish outpatient school-based service centers for teens housed in or adjacent to Oakland high schools. Designed with frank input from the teens they hope to reach, the centers have become national models and strive for a holistic approach to adolescent health care. "I can do a head-to-toe physical exam in about ten minutes," says Staggers, but she and her colleagues are equally concerned with assessing risk-taking behavior through conversation about home life, school, work, activities, diet, drugs, sex, mental health, and sexual assault.

According to Staggers, the three leading causes of death for adolescents nationally are motor vehicle injuries (primarily attributable to alcohol and drug abuse), homicide (an average of 15 per day, 79 percent of which involve firearms), and suicide. The statistics are devastating to communities and disheartening to individuals. "I have teens that don't expect to live to be 18 or 19," says Staggers. "They're not worried about the future. They don't think they have a future."

What's more, these deaths are all preventable, she says. "They have nothing to do with the physical health of teens. You are never healthier than you are as an adolescent."



Barbara Staggers

So why are they dying? Staggers points to what she calls "Barbara's Theory," namely that normal adolescence, experienced in a world of media-fueled mixed messages and unstructured time, results in risk-taking behavior. It is not only developmentally "normal" for adolescents to experiment, such experimentation is necessary in order to learn responsible decision-making skills. "You can't say, 'Don't experiment,'" she says. "They won't learn. You don't wake up at 18 automatically an adult. You've got to learn how to make decisions.

"But if you experiment with sex and have sex with somebody who is HIV positive, you can get AIDS. If you try a drug and you try heroin, you get addicted for life." Teens today, she observes, are growing up in a society where they can't afford to make mistakes. "So the work for us is to structure that experimentation so they don't do something that they pay for with the rest of their lives," says Staggers.

Youth Uprising, a youth center associated with Oakland's Castlemont High School, represents real hope. It is huge and appealing, with a café, a career center, a computer lab, child care, meeting rooms, studios, and performance spaces that offer activities, events, education, and employment—viable alternatives to violence, school failure, and lack of hope.

"Our youth are saying, 'Help us reduce the violence, make our community safer,'" reflects Staggers. "We need to respond. They are our most valuable resource. They are our future. And if they don't live long enough to become adults, we don't have a future." 📍

— Johanna Van Hise Heart