

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

MONICA ULHEE HAHN

SERVING THE ASIAN COMMUNITY

By Linda Anderberg

A nervous 17-year-old stands in front of a projected photo of three brightly colored dildos, each covered in a wrinkled condom. “You like this photo?” she asks the tittering crowd, composed mainly of teenagers, in a common room at the Asian Resource Gallery in the Asian Resource Center in Oakland.



From behind the projector, **Monica Ulhee Hahn, M.P.H. '06**, a student in the UC Berkeley-UCSF Joint Medical

Program (JMP), yells out, “I like that photo, Christina! I like it a lot!” The tension dissipates and the 17-year-old relaxes into her description of a sex education workshop that taught her a lot. “Before I joined this program, I didn’t even know what a condom was,” Christina concludes.

In all, eight teenagers spoke frankly about their experiences with gang violence, teen pregnancy, food choices, violence against women, and substance abuse. The event marked the culmination of the Asian Health Services (AHS) Youth Program Photovoice project, a project led by Hahn, in which Asian youth were given digital cameras to capture what they felt represented the most important health and social justice issues in Oakland. It is also a tribute to Hahn’s success in her goals: study medicine and public health, blend this training with focused social activism, give back to the Asian community, and break down Asian “model minority” stereotypes.

Growing up in what she describes as a very egalitarian and socially conscious household, Hahn always felt that health was a social justice issue,

but hadn’t quite figured out how to fit the two concepts together. As a UC Berkeley undergrad, she majored in molecular cell biology, minored in ethnic studies, and immersed herself in community activism. “I admittedly just went overboard,” she says. “I was in maybe five different student activist groups. I was definitely not a model pre-med student. I spent a lot of time organizing, demonstrating, and attending sit-ins, and I’m embarrassed to admit that I missed an O-Chem class or two.”

Things clicked into place for Hahn during a trip to South Africa with the National Youth Leadership Forum on Medicine to volunteer in HIV/AIDS clinics and orphanages. A nurse urged her to adopt the

baby she had been playing with in the orphanage, saying Hahn could save the girl’s life. This was not realistic for an 18-year-old college student working a job to pay for college, but Hahn realized there was a different way she could save lives. “Somewhere in that craziness of too much activism and traveling around the world, I made the connection that I didn’t want to just be a doctor helping on the individual level only,” she says. “I wanted to do something that affects health farther upstream. So I started looking more into health disparities work.” This led Hahn to the School of Public Health, where she studied maternal and child health. She spent her summer internship in the Dominican Republic conducting health needs assessment and developing a culturally appropriate and youth-friendly curriculum on teen pregnancy and HIV prevention for rural youth.

Hahn applied to medical schools while in the Dominican Republic, in spite of rolling blackouts that caused the computer to crash while she was sending in her applications. The JMP was her first choice



Monica Ulhee Hahn with Oakland teenagers who participated in the Asian Health Services Youth Program Photovoice Project



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1 Roger Saechao with his Photovoice display 2 Clifford Yee, AHS Youth Program coordinator and Monica Ulhee Hahn 3 Christina Wong with her Photovoice display

because—in addition to adding a sociocultural context to medicine—it allowed her to remain connected with her community, including the UC Berkeley School of Public Health, Asian Health Services in Oakland, her nuclear family in the Bay Area, and her apartment with her partner in San Francisco’s Mission District. The description of the Program for Medical Education in the Urban Underserved (PRIME-US) also seemed like a perfect fit to the community-conscious Hahn. “It’s basically a program for people who want to learn to be leaders in caring for the underserved communities and really look into health inequities,” says Hahn. “And that’s exactly how I want to practice medicine.” In addition, it allayed her concerns about losing her activist focus. “Some of my friends would say, you’re going to go sell out and become a plastic surgeon and do nose jobs for Hollywood!” But reading about PRIME-US she thought, “That’s the support I’m going to get, and that’s a program that’s going to help me make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Hahn can put these worries aside; one glance at her credentials assures one that she is in no danger of becoming a sell-out. Since her undergrad years, she has served as a medical assistant with Amerispan Guatemala, interned with Americorp Community Health Corps, served as medical coordinator of the

Women’s Suitcase Clinic, and cofounded Berkeley Advocates for Sexual Health, among other activities. But her most focused devotion has been to the AHS Youth Program in Oakland, where she has helped counsel at risk youth about health and sexuality issues since 2003. Hahn integrates AHS into her training whenever possible: as her JMP thesis project of Photovoice, her medical preceptorship for PRIME-US training to be a clinician, and her research

coordinator. “Monica has truly set the bar for future interns due to her immeasurable commitment to Asian Health Services.”

When asked about the one thing she would most like to accomplish in her future, Hahn responds with many: “To learn how to be an effective advocate for health policy issues on many levels. Covering the whole spectrum of prevention—being able to

“I wanted to do something that affects health farther upstream.”

for the Schweitzer Fellowship Program working on creating a male involvement program for Southeast Asian youths. She also recently attended a legislative hearing with AHS to support legislation protecting the health of nail salon workers, who are disproportionately Asian women. So Hahn is already giving back to the urban underserved as she trains to be a community health leader.

“As an intern, staff member, and volunteer, Monica has played a vital role in educating youth on reproductive health and implementing leadership training curriculums,” says Clifford Yee, AHS Youth Program

work at the policy level to affect legislation, but then also being able to do community organizing around really important advocacy issues, but then also being an effective one-on-one doctor and having a great relationship with patients.” And, she can’t resist adding, “to be a mentor to younger people all throughout my life wherever I am.”

It sounds like a tall order, but given all that Hahn has already accomplished, her passion for her ideal, and her seemingly tireless drive, it’s clear that she can achieve all this and more. 🌟