

Jon Gilbert Fox



CAPTURING OPTIMISM

THE GEISEL SCHOOL OF MEDICINE'S STUDENT-DRIVEN CHAPTER of Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is an independent national social justice organization that attracts medical students who deeply care about the well-being of those at the intersection of health and human rights.

"The delight in this work is being able to push students to bring their heart to this work, and with that, valuable things materialize in our community," says Manish Mishra (Med'05, MPH'09), a psychiatrist and a clinical assistant professor of community and family medicine, and one of the chapter's faculty mentors. "Every year, we have a chance to mobilize the creative energy and spirit of social justice that our students possess."

As this year's co-leaders, Lye-Yeng Wong, Rebecca Stern, and Vanessa Soetanto, all second-year Geisel students, exemplify that creative energy and spirit of social justice.

"PHR provides a community of peers and mentors for those who are committed to practicing social justice medicine," Stern says. "We're working to strengthen that community—to provide a place for discussions about human rights violations and

health inequities, and to create opportunities for all Geisel students to become better informed physicians with a greater social conscious."

Mentoring and developing leadership is integral to PHR, says Sarah Johansen, (Med'90), an assistant professor of medicine and faculty advisor to PHR. "It's important to select your leaders early, engage them, and give them an opportunity to work side-by-side," she says. "Equally important is how well the students and mentors work with each other."

Working together, Soetanto and Stern created a new social justice lunch series to bolster Dartmouth's social justice work. Hosted by diverse student groups, the lunches feature a spectrum of speakers involved in a variety of human rights issues.

"These lunches are not lectures," Soetanto points out. "Interactive and engaging discussions,

L-R: Rebecca Stern, Lye-Yeng Wong, Vanessa Soetanto

they focus on human rights issues and physicians' roles in and involvement with those issues."

The Prison Project, born a few years ago from a shared interest in inmate health issues, has evolved to diminish the negative stigma of those who have passed through New Hampshire's correctional facilities. Its focus has shifted from the inmate population to working with the John H. Sununu Youth Services Center in Manchester, and the Hartland Community Restorative Justice Center in White River Junction, Vermont. The Center's Restorative Justice Panels give community members an opportunity to build positive, supportive relationships with those who have committed crimes and who are working toward successful social integration.

"Medical students attending these sessions gain experience in motivational interviewing and broaden their perspectives by working with this unique population," Wong says. "Students consistently find value in diminishing the stigma—as future doctors, it is especially valuable to be able to connect on a deeper level with people of all backgrounds."

At the Sununu Center, a facility for juvenile offenders, Geisel students partner with Dartmouth undergraduates to teach HiSET, a high school equivalency test preparation course. HiSet is New Hampshire's version of the GED. Two Geisel students (former teachers) created and implemented a new curriculum taught to a pilot group of five students last summer—so far one student has taken and passed the test.

"We wanted to involve the Nathan Smith Society in this endeavor," Wong says, "because it's a good mentoring partnership for undergraduates who are interested in medicine. They have an opportunity to spend time with medical students and to establish a relationship with Geisel."

Johansen says the key to PHR's continued success lies with the type of students Geisel attracts, many have been involved in both domestic and global health equity—it's part of who they are. "But it is also about education, community, and creating a space to educate peers while working within the community on projects that address issues of social equity."

Mishra concurs, "PHR is a perfect vehicle to capture the optimism in Geisel students and allow for that to manifest into something profound."

SUSAN GREEN