



HEALTH & HOPE ON THE GO

JMU nursing students tend society's vulnerable homeless ... especially the children BY JEAN YOUNG KILBY

Children squiggle in their seats in a banana-yellow room at Mercy House. “How clean do you think your teeth are right now?” Emily Mitchell ('11) asks them. This week the children are learning about personal hygiene. Little Carly, her bright eyes dancing, examines a picture that Mitchell has handed her. She takes the paper in her hands and looks closely at the rotting teeth and decaying gums. Slapping the paper down, she declares in a matter-of-fact voice, “I’ve seen worse.” Mitchell giggles. Carly giggles with her. In Carly’s world, lack of dental care is not uncommon.

Mitchell and Stevie Burcham ('11), both JMU nursing students, along with Tammy Kiser, clinical instructor in nursing, are part of an emerging JMU initiative called Medical Suitcase Clinic for the Homeless. Once a



(Above): Carly represents the most vulnerable population of the community's homeless, the children. Here she learns a little about hygiene, nutrition and confidence through JMU's innovative outreach to Harrisonburg's homeless.

week in groups of two, JMU nursing students travel to Mercy House, a haven created to empower families to overcome homelessness together, to live out JMU's nursing motto: The science of healing. The art of caring.

They are part of a program that takes health care to local homeless shelters, seeking to serve the most vulnerable populations of society. Two years ago university and community leaders joined forces to examine ways to provide health care to the more than 300 homeless people in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County, an estimated 47 percent of whom are children. The coalition that resulted, the Healthy Community Council, came up with a plan that addresses their unconventional and complex needs.

These needs are often unexpected. Mercy House child services coordinator Sara Davis ('10) observes, for example, that since homeless children struggle with low self-esteem and poor self-presentation, they are often targets of bullying. So nursing students conduct role-playing sessions in which they serve as mentors, encour-

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– LINDA J. HULTON, *professor of nursing*

aging the children to recognize and consider their positive qualities. The nursing students work with image issues, showing how small details such as tucking in a shirt, brushing hair, smiling, and wearing modest clothing can influence how others view them. As a result, Davis says, she has observed the children out on the playground standing up for themselves, touting their own virtues when previously they would have bowed their heads in shame. She has seen self-respect blossom among the children. For this she credits the nursing students.

The purpose of the Medical Suitcase Clinic is not only to educate the public on health issues but also to connect clients to community resources through screenings and referrals. While Mitchell and Burcham converse with the five children who reside temporarily at Mercy House, trying to convince them that asparagus isn't all bad, another group of JMU nursing students interacts with an adult population at Our Community Place, a day shelter dedicated to the inclusiveness of those struggling with life's difficulties. These students are part of a health education and screening fair. With their nursing professor, Linda Hulton, they're poised by their handmade poster displays taking blood pressures, screening for vision, discussing pedestrian safety, warning against smoking and teaching dental health.

David Rea ('11) says he's a hands-on learner, and that he chose JMU's nursing program largely because the professors adjust their learning tools for the students. JMU's use of simulators, life-like mannequins, to teach nursing skills such as starting IVs and taking blood pressure attracted him to JMU's nursing program. Katie Lidard ('11) adds that she was drawn to JMU's nursing program because nursing students and faculty work closely together.

This is indeed the case. Nursing professors accompany the students to area shelters for education and screening. Once these initial student screenings are complete, the "suitcase nurse" comes in with a bag of medical supplies, enabling that nurse to treat a few of the chronic



JMU nursing student David Rea ('11) takes a blood pressure reading. Both JMU students and the local homeless benefit from the merger of learning and outreach of JMU's "suitcase nursing" program.

problems of the homeless: foot ulcers from frostbite; winter flu, cold and coughs; respiratory infections from smoking; diabetes; and bladder infections. Those who cannot be treated out of the suitcase are referred to the Harrisonburg Community Health Center.

"The police used to come here pretty frequently," Hulton says of Our Community Place, "just to check things out. But not so much anymore." With one man at his bongo drum, another busy at a computer, others dozing on sofas and most participating in the screening activities, it does feel like a place of peace. Hulton shares her mantra: When you bring health to a community, you bring peace to a community. She believes she and her nursing students are part of this peace-bringing process.

Jane Hubbell, associate director of JMU's Institute for Innovation in Health and Human Services, says that this medical suitcase clinic is filling a gap in health care services, increasing the quality of life for the community and paving the way for empirical research. "What gives this particular initiative a unique twist," says Hubbell, "is that we're melding the best of the university and its strengths with the support of the community." With coordination by IHHS, more than a dozen community agencies contribute financially to the clinic to hire a nurse practitioner and a medical case manager. She adds, "I think JMU should be proud of the fact that it is committed to graduating enlightened students and in doing so is improving the quality of life for our citizens in this community."

Hubbell sees the medical suitcase clinic not so much as JMU's bridge into the community, but as a tapestry, weaving together all the rich, vibrant, diverse strands that make up the collective culture. "Nursing students graduate and go to work at hospitals," she says. "They don't get to see [homeless] patients in their environment. This medical suitcase clinic will change the lenses of our nursing students and improve the quality of life for all our citizens. After all, she says with a nod, 'they' are 'us.'"

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