

MAKING A DIFFERENCE AROUND THE WORLD

LORNA THORPE

Alum's Journey from Bali to the Big Apple



Dr. Lorna Thorpe with her two year old daughter Daniela

Lorna Thorpe was working in Bali in 1994 for the University of Michigan as a USAID Behavioral Fellow on a research study that was trying to understand sexual risk practices among sex workers and their clients. She may not have ever pursued a PhD in Epidemiology, if it weren't for a fortuitous chance-meeting with a UIC School of Public Health professor.

Professor Wayne Wiebel was in Bali giving a presentation about AIDS through the help of a translator, when a hand went up and Thorpe—who spoke fluent Indonesian after living in the country for just one year and is also fluent in Chinese—approached him with a colleague to say that the interpreter was not doing the material justice. Thorpe, who now serves as Deputy Commissioner of Health at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, offered to translate the rest of the presentation with her colleague for Wiebel and continued to collaborate with him when he later returned to Indonesia on several occasions to conduct AIDS prevention training targeting sex workers.

“Lorna was really plugged into the scene,” Wiebel said. “She was a wonderful resource and one of the most pleasant people you ever want to meet.”

Thorpe was stationed in Bali for two years. In the first year, she and her colleagues spent much of their time collecting data, interviewing people, and engaging in ongoing education and assistance with clinical needs.

“My job was to interview tourist clients of prostitutes, and I spent most of my evenings in bars and discos, hanging out with the prostitutes,” Thorpe said. “They trusted me, and if they had a potential client, they would signal if they were comfortable with me talking to them. I’d build a rapport and if they were interested in the study, I’d set up an interview for the next day.”

In the second year, Thorpe spent a lot of time analyzing data, writing up findings, implementing interventions, involving all groups—sex workers, pimps, clients—and evaluating them.

“I got to know many, many people,” she said. “Nine years later, in 2003, I returned back to Indonesia for the first time. I stepped out of a taxi on the streets of the tourist town Kuta, and someone looked up and said ‘Hi Lorna – where have you been?’”

Wiebel said that after working with Thorpe for a short time, he knew that she had tremendous potential and would be the perfect candidate for a PhD. He also knew that she would be the type of student that many schools would be interested in recruiting.

“Each time I met her I asked her what her plans for the future were,” Wiebel said. “I asked her if a graduate degree was something she was interested in and told her that if she was interested in research she should pursue a PhD in Epidemiology at UIC.”

Dr. Lorna Thorpe, Deputy Commissioner of Health at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, in her office



To convince Thorpe to come to the UIC School of Public Health, Wiebel told her she could work at the organization he founded called the Community Outreach Intervention Projects (COIP). Based at the UIC School of Public Health, COIP targets drug users in neighborhoods across the Chicago area with an array of public health interventions and research studies.

“I knew once she saw what we were doing she would be bowled over – and she was,” Wiebel said.

As Wiebel hoped, Thorpe, who completed her PhD in Epidemiology at the UIC SPH in 2000, worked with COIP while doing her dissertation.

“I was running a young injector study and I remember talking to a mother of a 14-year-old who was injecting heroin in a Chicago suburb,” Thorpe said. “She had found information about our syringe exchange services and the research study in the pockets of her son’s clothes. We connected her to our outreach staff, and they helped her find a suitable treatment program.”

After completing her PhD, Thorpe was one of the only 50-70 people selected each year from thousands of applicants for a fellowship with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Epidemiological Intelligence Service. While with the CDC, Thorpe worked in Latvia and throughout the Baltic region on surveillance of multi-drug resistant Tuberculosis.

Thorpe’s work in Latvia led her to India to work with a prominent Tuberculosis researcher, Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, who would later become the New York City Health Commissioner and recruit Thorpe to her current job at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene,

where she has been since 2002, shortly after the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001.

Among Thorpe’s many tasks at the department is running a registry of 71,000 people who were exposed or potentially exposed to dust, particulates, and other environmental contaminants at the World Trade Center disaster, and endured or witnessed deeply traumatic events.

According to Thorpe, specialized monitoring and treatment services are available to people in the New York area and beyond who may have developed health problems as a result of their exposure to the World Trade Center (WTC) disaster. A combination of funding from city, federal and private sources has made treatment, medications and counseling available free-of-charge, she said.

While Thorpe’s work has taken her around the world, she now has an important reason to stay close to home as much as possible. Thorpe and her husband Marcos Sueiro have a 2-year-old daughter, Daniela.

“My work life changed considerably once she arrived,” Thorpe said. “Balance is the constant struggle, but I have changed my work style radically, from working late every night to leaving between 5-6pm every night except for one...I work late (very late) one night a week.”

While her work around the world has taught her so much, Thorpe credits much of her success to her teachers at the UIC SPH.

“My work at UIC taught me how to manage research projects and how to work with real world information, which doesn’t always come packaged as neatly as data from large, well-funded observational studies,” she said. “In terms of mentors, Larry Ouellet taught me how to write. Ron Hershow taught me how to think critically and keep the public health importance in sight, and Jack Goldberg taught me epidemiologic methods and expanded my love of data.”

Wiebel sees another reason for Thorpe’s success.

“What makes Lorna so special is her big heart and amazing intelligence,” he said. “When she sets her sights on something, she becomes fully engaged with intellect, curiosity and passion.” ■

UIC School of Public Health Professor, Dr. Wayne Wiebel with indigenous outreach workers he trained to target sex workers for HIV/AIDS intervention in Manado on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia

