

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA® — COLLEGE OF

# PUBLIC HEALTH

A roster of  
new faculty  
are pushing  
the envelope  
of infectious  
disease  
modeling.

2023  
*Annual  
Magazine*



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# FROM THE DEAN

Landmark Supreme Court decisions. Policy decisions and laws that feel driven by ideology, rather than evidence. A lingering mistrust in public health institutions and professionals.

The ground beneath our feet can feel shaky these days. You might ask, in this ever-changing landscape, how do we move forward?

At our College, we draw strength and clarity from an unwavering commitment to champion the health and well-being of every individual.

In our teaching, we enhance our curriculum with a focus on experiential learning, which often give our students direct experience addressing racial, socioeconomic, and geographic health disparities – students like Kiran Thapa and Abigail Ventimiglia, who you'll meet in the pages to come. These students have taken advantage of opportunities to join faculty research and intern with organizations that provided direct experience in the areas where they want to grow in their careers.

Our research drives action. We contribute to the science of public health to inform the evidence base and contribute to policy change. This issue you will meet two disease modelers who are working with collaborators within the College, across UGA campus, and with other institutions to bolster our nation's ability to forecast and respond to future outbreaks.

And, in our outreach efforts, we listen first. We ask, how can we help? We need to understand the "whys." If we don't understand, we cannot make any progress.

The conversations we must have -- they're not always easy. Whether inside the classroom or out in the world, we continually challenge and support one another, grappling with the multifaceted roles we each play as educators, as researchers, and as advocates.

But beneath all this action is a foundational principle: the quest for understanding. It's crucial for us to delve deep, to unearth the whys of differing beliefs. Without this foundational understanding, there will be no progress.

The path ahead? It's filled with challenges. Yet, confronting and surmounting these hurdles is woven into the fabric of who we are. After all, our duty is to engage everyone, regardless of social, political and economic background, to be part of the solution and to champion approaches to elevate the health of all.

So, let's lead with compassion, patience, and understanding. Let's never forget, even amidst heated debates and divisive topics, our shared bond – the spirit of humanity that hopes, dreams and aspires for a brighter future for our communities, our nation and our shared global home.

We move  
forward,  
together.



*Marsha Davis*

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### About the University of Georgia College of Public Health

The University of Georgia College of Public Health is committed to improving the health and well-being of all within our home state and around the world through innovative research, exemplary education, and engaged service.

Founded in 2005 as a response to the state's need to address important health concerns in Georgia, the College of Public Health is comprised of four academic departments and three research institutes.

Our dedicated faculty and students are working in and with communities to address the issues that matter to them, including aging, disaster preparedness, environmental science, infectious disease prevention, maternal and child health, obesity, and shaping policy.

As a fully-accredited College of Public Health, we are training future change-makers in public health to lead and serve.

### ALSO FEATURED....

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COLLEGE NEWS

2022 BRINGS SOPH BACK IN PERSON

The 2022 State of Public’s Health Conference (SOPH) returned in-person on October 27th for the first time since 2019. The conference hosted two keynote speakers **Montreце McNeill Ransom** (left) and **J. Marshall Shepherd** (right), who discussed health equity issues and climate change, respectively. The event showcased research and outreach projects exploring topics on mental health, community health, maternal and child health and reducing health equities.



NEW ONLINE MPH TAKES OFF SPRING 2024

UGA Public Health has launched an online MPH program, with its first cohort beginning in Spring 2024.

**Melissa Howard**, the College’s new Director of Online Learning and Professional Practice, will supervise all online programming and lead the development of a more robust professional education to serve Georgia’s public health workforce.



COLLEGE WELCOMES NEW ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERS



**Charles Easley (right)** was named Associate Dean of Research in April. Since joining EHS in 2015, he’s obtained more than \$10 million in funding, including multiple interdisciplinary grants. Easley plans to expand federal funding, enhance mentorship for junior faculty and increase collaborations within the College.

**Lucy Annang Ingram (left)** joined the College of Public Health as our new HPB Department Head in July. Learn more about Ingram in our profile on page 11.





## ROUND OF APPLAUSE



In February 2023, **Christopher Whalen**, Director of the Global Health Institute and Karen and Jim Holbrook Distinguished Professor in Global Health, was awarded an honorary doctorate by Makerere University in Uganda for his contributions to Africa and the University. Since 1991, Whalen has partnered with researchers in Uganda to study and improve conditions for people living with HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis transmission.

**Ye Shen**, associate professor in the Department of Epidemiology & Biostatistics, was one of two professors awarded the Georgia Clinical and Translational Science Alliance (CTSA) President's Award for Team Science in 2023. The award recognizes excellence in multidisciplinary research.



The **University of Georgia** and the Georgia Tech Research Institute (GTRI), in partnership with the Georgia Department of Public Health, have received a 5-year, \$17 million cooperative agreement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to establish a Pathogen Genomics Center of Excellence. It is part of a \$90 million investment from the CDC for the network of centers in five states. The goal for these centers is to help translate innovations from academia into public health departments. Public Health's **Justin Bahl** (left) is leading a UGA team's efforts to translate new discoveries into usable data and interventions.

## UNIVERSITY HONORS PUBLIC HEALTH FACULTY

**Jessica Muilenburg** was awarded the 2023 Graduate School Dean's Award for Outstanding Contributions to Graduate Education. She has been the graduate coordinator for the Department of Health Promotion and Behavior since 2012 where she is committed to mentoring and training researchers and professionals in public health and in fostering diversity and inclusion in the public health and academic workforce.



HPB internship coordinator **Katie Hein** earned the Service-Learning Teaching Excellence Award, which recognizes innovative instruction through the development of academic service-learning opportunities for UGA students.

## NEWS & NOTES

**Michelle Ritchie**, assistant professor in the Institute for Disaster Management, was awarded a 2023 First Year Odyssey (FYO) Teaching Award, which recognizes outstanding instructors who have demonstrated creativity and innovation in instruction, connection to the instructor's research and incorporation of FYO program goals.



**The Cognitive Aging Research and Education (CARE) Center** was awarded the Team Impact Award from UGA's Office of Research, recognizing a team for excellence in innovative and impactful scholarship that promises to fundamentally advance knowledge, understanding and applications in ways not achievable by individual investigators or single disciplinary approaches alone.

EHS senior **Lily Metsker** received the 2023 Presidential Award of Excellence, celebrating her high standard of excellence in academics, research and service.



**Ebony Caldwell** (BSHP '13, MPH '13), **Yaritbel Torres-Mendoza** (MPH '17, DVM '18) and **Taylor Winkleman-Cagle** (MPH '15, DVM '16) have been named to UGA 40 Under 40 — a program that celebrates Bulldogs leading the pack in their industries and communities. Congratulations to these committed public health change-makers!

## CPH HONORS FACULTY, STAFF, STUDENTS, AND COMMUNITY WITH 2023 AWARDS

The College of Public Health ends the 2022–2023 academic year by honoring excellence from faculty, staff, students, alumni and community members. Sixty people were recognized this year for advancing public health, including these College awards –

**Excellence in Teaching Award:** Paula Davis-Olwell, Epidemiology & Biostatistics, Global Health Institute

**Excellence in Research Award:** Chas Easley, Environmental Health Sciences

**Excellence in Service Award:** Mumbi Anderson, Health Policy & Management, Office of Academic Affairs

**Outstanding Online Faculty Award:** Kerstin Emerson, Health Policy & Management, Institute of Gerontology

**CPH Outstanding Staff Award:** Caroline Bloodworth, Office of Academic Affairs Undergraduate Advising Office

**CPH Staff Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Leadership Award:** Lauren Baggett, Communications Office

## HELPING HANDS



This Spring, **Dean Marsha Davis** established the Dean Marsha Davis Graduate Fellowship Fund to provide needs-based scholarships to first-generation graduate students. As a first-gen student herself, Davis hopes this scholarship will help reduce financial barriers, especially for rural students who want to pursue a degree in public health.



**Elliott Marsh** (BSA '02, MAL '11) and his wife **Christy** donated \$25,000 to establish the Chris and Annette Marsh CARE Center Student Support Fund in memory of his father, who was diagnosed with Lewy Body Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease. Marsh learned about the Cognitive Aging Research & Education (CARE) Center mission to combat dementia and Alzheimer's disease at a UGA Alumni Association board meeting in 2022.

→ *Contact [lglaf@uga.edu](mailto:lglaf@uga.edu) to learn more about giving to the University of Georgia College of Public Health.*

## CPH ALUMNI BOARD WELCOMES NEW LEADERS

**Kim Metcalf** (BSEH '93, MS '96) and **David Johnson**, CIH, MSPH (BSEH '93) are stepping into the roles of president and vice president of the CPH Alumni Board. An environmental scientist and owner of Riverbend Environmental Inc., Metcalf is a dedicated UGA alum and has served UGA's Alumni Association Board and Athens chapter. Newly returned to Georgia, David is an Industrial Hygiene & Health Manager at SAIF Corporation, one of Oregon's largest workers' compensation carriers.







# DYNAMICS DUO

Two new faculty deepen  
UGA's roster of infectious  
disease modelers

By Lauren Baggett



**Before 2020, few people outside of the public health community knew much about the world of infectious disease modeling.**

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic lingered month after month, politicians, local leaders, and even the general public began looking to models of all kinds to help make tricky policy and personal decisions.

Over the past 20 years, UGA has been building a deep bench of researchers investigating infectious disease dynamics across multiple disciplines and units. Now, the University is investing millions of dollars to build capacity for cutting edge research, with a particular focus on pandemic prevention and preparedness.

Enter **Spencer Fox** and **Amy Winter**, two new faculty at the University of Georgia College of Public Health, whose expertise in infectious disease modeling will contribute to the university's position as a global leader in this work.

### THE FORECAST LOOKS GOOD

**Spencer Fox** joined the College's Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics in 2022 as part of the Presidential Interdisciplinary Faculty Hiring Initiative in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence.

A self-described biologist at heart, Fox is fascinated by biological systems, and

said that "disease dynamics are caused by complex biological interactions between pathogens, humans, and our communities."

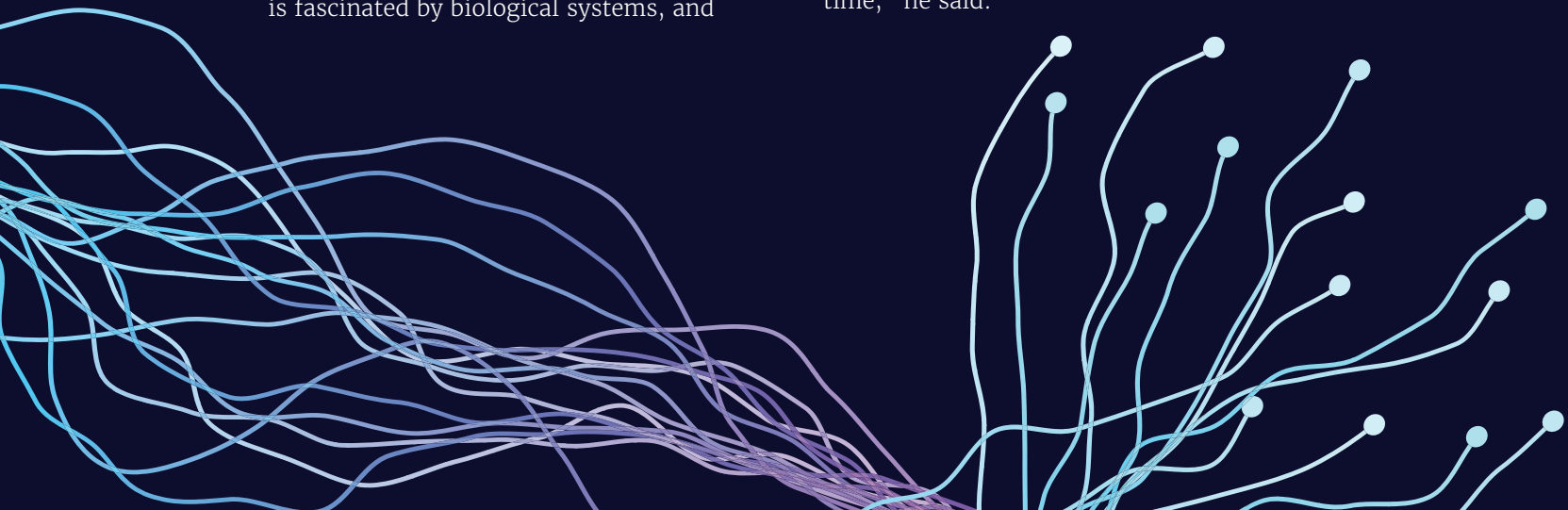
"I'm driven by using what we uncover about those underlying interactions to improve our public health responses to outbreaks of viruses like COVID-19, Zika, or Ebola" he said.

At UGA, Fox (pictured right) has a number of projects looking to improve infectious disease forecast models, which are used by public health officials and elected leaders to anticipate regional healthcare needs during an epidemic.



"Improving our forecast models will require us to improve the data powering those models and how we integrate it into our predictions. During the pandemic, we gained access to data that we've never had before," he said, "like how people were moving through their communities or the rates that people were wearing masks and getting vaccinated."

"What we found is that this type of behavioral data can improve our ability to predict future infectious disease trends. Now I'm working to harness artificial intelligence approaches to more seamlessly integrate data into our models in real-time," he said.







## SHAPING GLOBAL POLICY

Models have proved to be a powerful tool to guide global policy to curb infectious disease. **Amy Winter**, who joined the College of Public Health as an assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics in 2021, specializes in strategic and theoretical modeling for childhood infectious disease, primarily focused on measles and rubella.



In 2020, Winter (pictured left) led a World Health Organization-commissioned strategic modelling study on the feasibility of elimination of measles and rubella using predominant vaccination strategies in 93 countries with the highest disease burden.

She recently expanded that effort to WHO's Southeast Asia Region, where her team helped public health leaders determine a new timeline for eliminating measles and rubella in the region after COVID-19 set back their efforts.

"We presented the work at a regional meeting in March [2023] where all the countries from the Southeast Asia Region were there to set the new elimination target date," said Winter. And it was gratifying to see the work being used to inform the new date, she says.

"Ultimately, I want to engage in research with direct policy implications that reduces the burden of infectious diseases."

Winter's research focus is largely global, with her closest collaborators being the public health departments in Zambia and India. These organizations are serving populations with limited resources to track and prevent infectious disease, but new technologies, says Winter, are enabling modelers to better understand disease transmission.

She sees promise in the use of multi-plex serological data, which can be derived from a drop of blood to reveal how an individual's immune system is responding to hundreds of different pathogens.

"Those types of serological data can help us better understand antibody kinetics, but they can also help us understand infectious disease landscapes of a burden in a more robust way than simply using reported case data," said Winter.

Both Fox and Winter found a home in public health due to their desires to help people. Now, along with a robust community of scientists at the College and UGA, they are pushing the field forward.

Fox and Winter join a roster of infectious disease modelers at UGA Public Health, including Justin Bahl, Andreas Handel, and Ye Shen, who are contributing to an effort to develop a universal flu vaccine. Winter is also contributing to the Center for Applied Pathogen Epidemiology and Outbreak Response (CAPE), led by Justin Bahl (more on page 5).

Photo credit: Becky Ayer

## FAST FACTS

- PhD, Health Education and Health Promotion, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- MPH, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- BA, Psychology, Emory University

**Go-to road trip snack:**  
Sunflower seeds

**Favorite TV genre:**  
Home renovation shows

**Coffee shop order:**  
Grande London Fog with oat milk and two extra pumps of vanilla

## in conversation with **LUCY ANNANG INGRAM**

**In July 2023, Lucy Annang Ingram joined the UGA College of Public Health as the new Department Head of Health Promotion and Behavior. UGA Public Health Magazine editor Lauren Baggett sat down with Dr. Ingram to learn more about her journey into public health and to UGA.**

**Lauren Baggett (LB):** Can you tell me a little bit about young Lucy? Did she see herself working in a health-related career?

**Lucy Annang Ingram (LI):** I'm not sure if

young Lucy thought that she would, but her parents did. I am a child of Ghanaian immigrants, and out of three children, I'm the youngest and the only one that's born in the U.S. One thing that was very important from the beginning was the pursuit of education, and very early on, I remember my parents saying, "you're going to be a doctor, you're going to go to medical school." And so, I stayed that course through college. I was pre-med when I entered Emory University, a psychology major, and the psychology piece was really what intrigued me more

than the hardcore science classes. I was a solid student, but when it came time to take the MCAT junior year, that's when it hit me that medical school isn't the route. I knew that I wanted to do something else academic after undergraduate, but I did not think it would be medicine, so I was encouraged to take a public health class. This was back when public health was not on the tip of the tongue of everyone. Being at Emory, we had Rollins School of Public Health right next door, a very star-studded institution, and I audited a class in public health, introductory epidemiology. That was a tough class, but being exposed to the public health content really excited me. And so, because of that experience, I then decided to pursue graduate study in public health.

**LB:** You grew up in Chicago, but you've earned your degrees and done most of your work in the South. So, what is unique about studying and working in public health in this region?

**LI:** For me, it certainly has been an important part of my identity. I think I very much relate to a Southern tradition and a Southern way of living – community-oriented, helpful to others, supportive of others. And so, I think at a most basic level, that's what attracts me as a child of African immigrants. What I've really gravitated toward is addressing racial and ethnic health disparities. And so, I think that partly is a function of my lived experience. And so that's been something that organically has been part of my passion in terms of the research that I've chosen to do.

**LB:** I'm interested to hear about what you've studied related to those disparities in sexual and reproductive health care.

**LI:** Yeah, so the first bit of work that I did in this field was working in graduate study on a project, *Sistering, Informing, Healing, Living, and Empowering* (SiHLE), that's now become a CDC evidence-based sexual health intervention for African American female teens. And that was probably the best type of training that I could have gotten in terms of program implementation, targeting your research and being culturally competent. We saw so many disparate rates by race and ethnicity in terms of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Then I started really integrating community-based methods. I've done work with high school students, with community groups, nonprofit organizations and grassroots organizations – all working around sexual and reproductive health, making sure that we have optimal options for prevention and treatment. I have a book chapter in *Black Health in the South* that was just released this year by Johns Hopkins University Press focused on the sexual and reproductive health of African American women in the American South. I was so pleased to be able to do that and really highlight what have been some of the challenges experienced by this population and a path forward to try to thwart some of the negative outcomes that we see related to maternal mortality and risk for Black women, in particular.

**LB:** Could you preview some of those challenges and paths forward?

**LI:** Some of the highlights include delving into reproductive justice, ensuring that the lens and the perspective that we take with doing work with these populations respects people's rights, and making sure that we are engaging people from an ethical perspective, making sure that decisions are made autonomously



and are patient-centered. We delve into provider bias and perspective, and how, intentionally or unintentionally, there may be actions taken that make a woman's choices very difficult for her experiences not to be optimized. Then we end with a discussion of different types of interventions to optimize Black women's sexual and reproductive health such as community engagement, using mobile technologies, breastfeeding, doula care, and engaging with grassroots organizations, in particular, who are already doing amazing work in this area, and not only relying on those of us who are doing academic research. Really highlighting the work of people who are in the field and who are very much so experts in these areas.

**LB:** What research projects are you planning to do while you're here?

**LI:** We are talking about sexual and reproductive health and I plan to continue to conduct research in this area, but I also have interests in aging, so affiliating with the Institute of Gerontology would be ideal. I was recently co-investigator on a five-year research grant where we worked to build infrastructure and offer professional development opportunities to increase the number of underrepresented and minoritized faculty who are conducting research in aging. Along the lines of infrastructure-building, I also recently co-led a team that garnered over \$13 million to support diversity initiatives, namely recruitment and retention of diverse early stage faculty who were committed to inclusive excellence.

**LB:** Shifting gears a little bit more into your role as department head, what excites you about the opportunity to lead HPB?

**LI:** I really am excited. In my previous role I was an associate dean, and that was certainly an opportunity to lead, but I see this as a different way to lead. This opportunity within the department of health promotion and behavior is to lead collaborative teams, to lead people individually toward their promotion opportunities. I think there's something to be said for having mentorship or sponsorship at multiple levels. Oftentimes we relegate mentorship to being a top-down flow of information or resources, and we kind of think it ends at being a student or a junior faculty member, but there are opportunities wherever you are in your career to be mentored or sponsored by others. And so, I'm excited about the opportunity to help people's careers flourish.

**LB:** How do you see yourself and your role in helping to prepare that next generation of health professionals to take on these big issues?

**LI:** I mentioned that a lot of my work is community-driven by nature. The way that you collaborate best with the community is to have a transformative process. Oftentimes, I think academicians have, sometimes legitimately, a bad reputation for going into communities and taking assets away and not embracing a collaborative process. Teaching students to ensure that even though we may have an academic skill set, community members and people around us in our environment also have a skill set that we need to be respectful of and also honor. That's inherent in the way that I approach the research that I do and certainly would be part of what is integrated into the training that I do both formally and informally.





# STOP AND SMELL *The Flowers*

Garden-based program  
supports people with  
Alzheimer's and their  
caregivers

By Lauren Baggett  
and Laurel Clark

It's a quintessential spring morning at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia at the University of Georgia. The sun is starting to peek out from behind a patchwork of pale gray clouds, warming the air.

It's an idyllic setting for another session of Meet Me at the Garden. This pilot program, delivered by the education teams at UGA's Cognitive Aging Research & Education (CARE) Center and the State Botanical Garden, wants to "expand the bubble" of persons living with dementia and their caregivers through interactive education and sensory activities.

Four pairs of people with dementia and their caregivers signed up to participate in this pilot program, attending four sessions over four months. Each two-hour session has a learning theme – today's is all about greens – and a CARE Center team member, cheerfully referred to as a Garden Guru, supports each pair throughout the session by answering questions and serving as a personal guide.

Tony, a Meet Me at the Garden participant, sits on a raised bed at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia.



The pairs and their Gurus gather at the Children's Garden among a semi-circle of raised beds chock full of winter vegetables and flowers. Today, they are planting and harvesting greens and herbs. "Tony, we get to take home some plants!" exclaims Odette, one of the participants. "Won't that be nice?" she asks her husband Tony, who stands at her side.

Odette takes a few steps back as Tony leans over a spray of kale and cabbage leaves. Yellow and purple pansies stand out against a background of bright green. Children's Garden staff show Tony where to snip at the base of the kale stems and hand him a pair of scissors.

Odette snaps a few pictures of Tony, then turns to survey another raised bed of lettuces next to her.

Two months ago, at the first session of Meet Me at the Garden, Odette stuck close, seemingly reluctant to leave Tony alone for too long. It's become a habit. For the last year and a half, Odette has watched as Tony's processing speed, memory and ability to take care of himself have slowly slipped away due to Alzheimer's disease.

The CARE team knows this dynamic all too well.

"When someone becomes a caregiver, one thing that happens," says CARE Center co-director **Lisa Renzi-Hammond**, "is that relationship dynamics shift in a way that is uncomfortable for both caregivers and for patients."

"Spouses, for example, who were equal partners in a relationship end up becoming unbalanced and asymmetrical," she said. "So, instead of both partners jointly making decisions together, problem solving together, one partner ends up

having to make the bulk of the decisions and telling the other partner what to do."

Odette is learning to care for Tony in this new dynamic.

Tony was a chemical engineer who loved working with his hands and getting out into nature. He used to garden and once built a catamaran from scratch, even sewing the sail himself. And, Odette and Tony loved taking walks at Sandy Creek Park with their dog, Zoro.

Now, Odette says, Tony just wants to watch TV most days.

"My main goal [of participating in Meet Me at the Garden] was to see Tony interacting and how he enjoys being creative still," she said.

## STIMULATING THE SENSES

Art and music therapy are commonly recommended to help persons living with dementia because they help them tap back into their creativity and engage in their senses.

"Senses are the gateway to the brain," said Renzi-Hammond. "If you are going to stimulate a brain and have it do something magnificent, it usually happens through the senses."



The CARE Center is engaged in multiple levels of research to better understand and prevent Alzheimer's disease as well as outreach to communities to provide better support and education on an issue that impacts over 6.5 million people in the U.S. and an estimated 150,000 Georgians.

When the State Botanical Gardens approached the CARE team about adapting a Meet Me at the Garden program, they jumped at the opportunity. The garden's education director was connected with Master of Public Health student **Lydia Burton** to start developing a curriculum for the program. Each session, they decided, would have things available to taste, touch, smell, manipulate and to take home to look back on and remember.

The session topics included the history of coffee and tea, chocolate, how eating greens helps your brain, and native plants and pollinators.

"The beautiful thing about Meet Me at the Garden is that we are all learning together," said Burton, who's delivering the program curriculum as part of her capstone project. "We experience everything together, and we are learning to be healthy together."



At the end of each session, Burton and the Garden Gurus help their pairs fill out

a questionnaire that asks about how the day's session made an impact on both the dementia patients and their caregiver.

"What the program really wants to do," said Burton, "is 'expand the bubble' for their participants."



## THE BENEFITS OF A BIGGER BUBBLE

As Alzheimer's or dementia progresses, people living with the disease and their care partner tend to stay home where the environment feels familiar and safe, rarely socializing with others.

"When people are in that bubble together, they're isolated. Every day is exhausting, it's just getting to the next day. This is something that's accessible," said Burton.

Meet Me at the Garden was designed to offer a space where everyone can be on equal footing and the responsibility of caregiving is distributed around the room.

Garden Guru **Hannah Huff** is happy to take on this responsibility. She's been working with Tony and Odette since they first contacted the CARE clinic hoping to get a diagnosis, when Huff was answering the phones as a student worker.

"It's great that I'm able to be here to support them so that they can experience

these things without Odette having to be like, “OK, I’m the caregiver. I need to be a caregiver 24/7. No, I can just exist and be here with my husband and go on a walk in the sensory gardens,”” said Huff. “It’s really nice to see her exhale and let her explore.”



Odette also has more opportunities to interact with other caregivers and talk about the challenges and the hard days.

“What I find the hardest is when he cannot use the TV remote,” said Odette. “He doesn’t watch TV, and I know it’s because he’s not able to use the TV remote, and then I have all those questions — is it his ego? He doesn’t want to ask me because he’s unable, and he doesn’t want me to know? Is he suffering? Does he feel less about himself? It’s all that internal talk that really wears me down. I just hope he’s happy.”

Odette says she does see a difference in Tony on the days they come to Meet Me at the Garden. He’s engaged with the activities and moves around a lot more. When Odette tells Tony they’re going to the Botanical Garden, he smiles.

“When I see him involved in something that he likes, of course it makes me feel good,” Odette said, “and also it breaks our schedule being able to meet other people,

because it’s me and him all the time, or doctors and appointments. So, it’s nice, it’s refreshing, and I feel supported. This is like my second family. My first family, really, because I don’t have anybody here.”

The pilot program wrapped up in April, but the team is planning to apply for funds to adapt and expand the program to rural counties where the CARE team is offering other support services.

Today, Odette and Tony are going home with a bag of kale, a salad dressing they made together with fresh thyme, and plenty of photos of Tony that Odette will share with her cousin.

Renzi-Hammond hopes that each of the participants, whether in this pilot or in future programs, will take home more than souvenirs of their day at Meet Me at the Garden.

“We hope that people look at the things that they take home from the garden, the plants that they bring back into their spaces, as a way of remembering that it is still possible to connect with their loved one and engage with them,” she said.





# 日本

Stretching along Japan's Pacific coast and wrapped around Suruga Bay, Shizuoka Prefecture, is home to the famed volcano, Mount Fuji.

This mountainous region is also home to Shizuoka University of Art and Culture, where students from the UGA College of Public Health make their way each year to study with local students, faculty and local health care leaders.

Students, most of them studying health promotion, have been participating in the College's study abroad program since 2017 when professor **Jessica Muilenburg** and Japanese colleague **Yoko Kawamura-Onuma** decided to expand their working relationship to a learning opportunity.

"I think it is important to have both an educational experience and a cultural experience. It is important to see how different countries operate and make decisions for their citizens," said Muilenburg.











Before they leave the U.S., students begin researching a health topic, such as smoking cessation or mental health, to investigate once they get to Japan. Once in Shizuoka, they observe how local health institutions are using communication and policy tools to address the issue as well as cultural norms around their topic.



**Saher Khan**, a fourth-year pre-med student and public health minor, studied how Japan's built environment supports a preventative approach to health.

"As a public health student, it was very eye opening. I realized that public health is everywhere. In Japan, very small, nuanced things all had [public health] purposes. Every little spot you go to, you can experience public health. When I came back to the U.S., it made me restructure my way of thinking," said Khan.

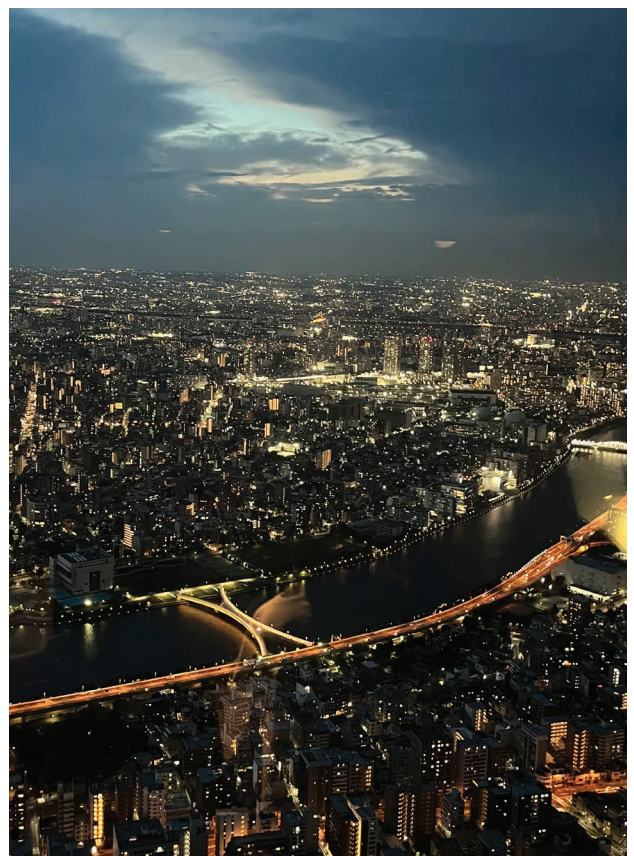




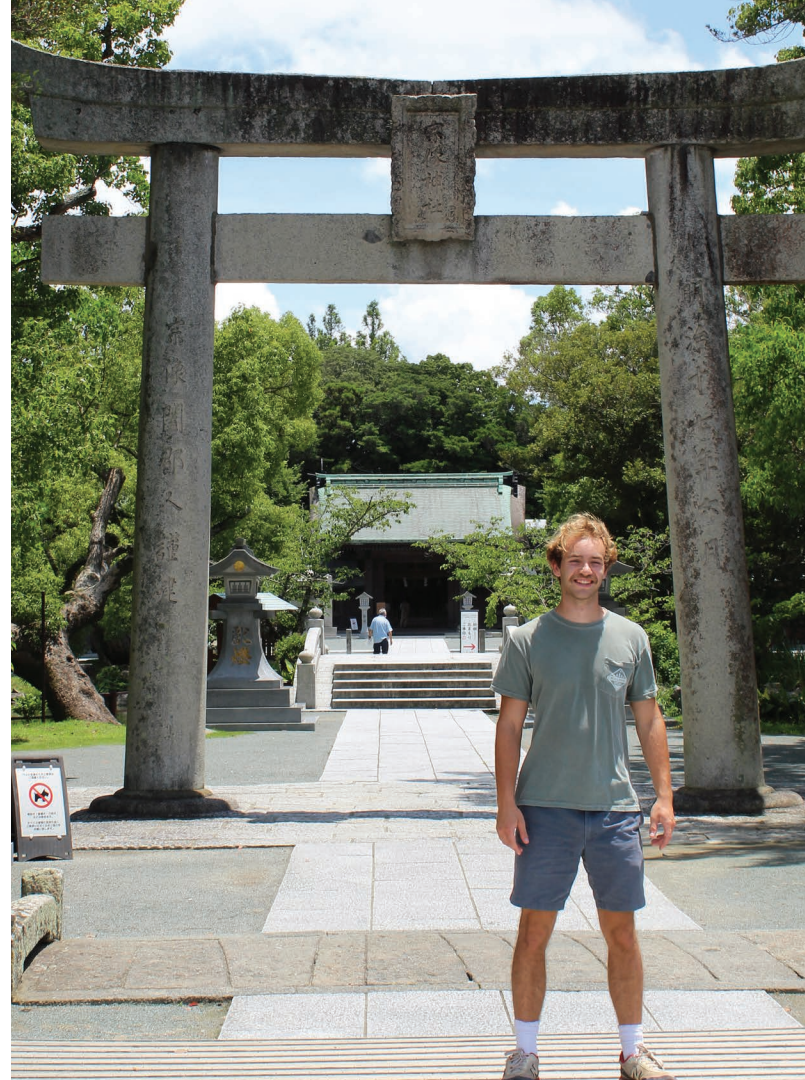


**ONE IN FOUR**  
UGA STUDENTS  
STUDIES ABROAD  
BEFORE  
GRADUATION









**Emily Loedding** (BSHP '20, MPH '22) participated in the program in 2019. She studied how Japan's infrastructure is designed to be accessible to older adults.



"The mentality of younger Japanese people towards aging is respectful and reverent, while in the U.S. we often see aging as the worst possible outcome. I believe these vastly different viewpoints play out in how we adapt public transportation, walkways, and parks to be accessible for those who are hard of hearing or seeing," said Loedding.

Loedding's experience abroad helped her see that people have more in common than not.

"I quickly realized that we were all similar, yet different. We all desired to make the world a better, safer, healthier place for all people, but growing up in vastly different educational and cultural contexts shaped our views on how to go about making changes," said Loedding.







# The Kid Who Never Left School

By Becky Ayer

## OCCUPATION:

- Retired

## PAST OCCUPATION:

- Chief, Program Development & Services Branch, Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) — 2005 – 2019

## UGA DEGREES EARNED:

- Doctor of Public Health, Health Policy & Management, College of Public Health, University of Georgia, 2018

## CURRENT HOME:

- Atlanta, Georgia

## HOMETOWN:

- Springfield, Missouri

It's safe to say that **William (Bill) Potts-Datema** likes school. In 2018, just one year away from retirement, he earned a Doctor of Public Health degree from UGA Public Health.

"The academic program helped me have the theoretical underpinnings and the academic piece of it that I always really craved. And I had some great teachers," he said. "In health policy class, we'd go through some theory and my instructor would go, 'So, Bill, how's that play out?' It was fun. They honored my practical experience, and I appreciated that."

A veteran 'policy guy' who has served with several national health and education organizations, Potts-Datema has been thinking about how to make schools places where students can thrive, in terms of both their education and health, since he was a teen.

At age 15, he led an effort to help his local PTA unit in Springfield, Missouri, become a Parent Teacher and Student Association. The National Parent Teacher Association, now celebrating its 125-year anniversary, is the largest and oldest volunteer organization focused exclusively on connecting parents, teachers, and administrators and supporting critical school needs.

He went on to hold a youth position on the National PTA Board, where he served on the Health & Welfare committee, and learned how policy can affect not just education, but also health. He has been working at the intersection between



education and public health ever since.

Potts-Datema's first job out of graduate school was as the director of community health for the Greater Ozarks Chapter of the Red Cross in the mid- to late 1980s. Initially hired to develop an HIV/AIDS prevention education program for blood donors, Potts-Datema was soon leading efforts to adapt the program for educators and hospitals, since many were not even using well-known universal precautions at this time.



Throughout his career, he continued to lead projects, many partially funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where he had a hand in shaping education and public health policy. In 2005, he began working at the CDC, where he went on to lead healthy schools program development for the Division of Adolescent and School Health.

Potts-Datema retired in 2019, but he remains active in his service work. As a private citizen, he uses his time and experience to focus on political activism and advocating for change at the federal level. Most recently, he contributed to the 3rd edition of the National Health Education Standards published in 2022, which updated school health education standards in a post-COVID world.

Potts-Datema's DrPH dissertation identified health risk factors that make it

difficult for young people in Argentina, Peru and Bolivia to attend school. His main takeaway was that the risk behaviors, and ultimately the barriers to education, in these three South American countries were like those in the United States.

"You're much more likely to have a longer, happier, healthier, more productive life if you're well educated. It's important for communities and society to think about how to mitigate barriers that keep young people out of school," he said.

Potts-Datema's mission to support students in school continues still. He was recently named President-Elect of the National Parent Teacher Association and will begin his three-year term in his 50th year of service, bookending his initial experience helping his local unit become a PTSA.

Potts-Datema says the PTA's motto – "every child, one voice" – has always resonated with him.



"Every kid is important. It doesn't matter where they live. It doesn't matter how they identify. It doesn't matter who their parents are, or where they came from, or what they believe in. None of that matters. If they're on the planet, and they have DNA, then, yeah, they're in our care. It's that simple."



# ABIGAIL VENTIMIGLIA

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

By Becky Ayer and Chancey Phillips

**Abigail Ventimiglia**, a dual health promotion bachelor's-MPH student, is making the most out of the experiential and service learning opportunities provided at UGA.

Over the past 4 years, Ventimiglia has supported educational programming at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia, conducted health policy research for a consulting firm, helped food insecure

families in Athens, and worked with the City of Decatur to improve health and wellbeing at the local level.

"I fell in love with UGA because of how social and welcoming the people were in addition to the numerous opportunities that come with attending a big school. There's practically a club for everything!" she said.



Throughout her career at UGA, Ventimiglia has dedicated her time outside of class to helping others.

“I’ve spent a large part of this year working as a UGA Health Equity Fellow with the City of Decatur to improve health and wellbeing at a local level. It’s taught me that everyone has a unique skill set and background, and communication is vitally important to working together and creating meaningful change,” she said.

In 2022, Ventimiglia worked with the State Botanical Garden as a Public Service and Outreach (PSO) Scholar to help revitalize their K-12 curriculum on native plants and pollinator conservation, in addition to serving on their Garden Ambassador Learning by Leading Team creating social media and film educational videos. She cites her time as a PSO Scholar as one of the more meaningful experiences she’s had at UGA.

Ventimiglia also served the College of Public Health as an undergraduate

ambassador and volunteered for a year and a half with UGA’s Campus Kitchen, a student-run organization that is devoted to feeding those in need in the local Athens-Clarke County community.

This past summer, Ventimiglia worked with FTI Consulting in Washington D.C., in the organization’s Health Solutions Risk Advisory department.

Having worked in their Atlanta department last year, “I learned that data is more important than ever. It is the driving force behind health promotion programs and health policy. It informs our processes better, and I want to be able to access, understand, and explain data in a way everyone can understand,” said Ventimiglia.



# PREPARED FOR WHATEVER TOMORROW BRINGS

By Mollie Tolbert

**Elizabeth Hardister** had her eyes set on getting a master's degree from the University of Georgia Institute for Disaster Management (IDM) before she had even declared an undergraduate major.

Her interest in emergency preparedness began when she was in high school, cheering on her father who was competing in the 2013 Boston Marathon where two homemade bombs detonated near the finish line injured hundreds of people and killed three.

Her father was OK, but Hardister remembers being struck by how quickly

first responders mobilized resources to get people to safety.

"You hear sirens in the background as you're going through your day, but before that, I had never taken notice of the infrastructure and the coordination that is required to respond to large emergencies like that," she said.



In 2018, Hardister presented a talk at TEDxUGA on how everyday people can be prepared to be first responders.



This incident also sparked a desire to study international relations, intending to combine her interests to focus on international emergency response. As soon as she started at UGA, Hardister began conducting research with IDM. In four years, she received a bachelor's in international affairs and a Master of Public Health, with a concentration in disaster management. In 2018, she was selected as a Schwarzman Scholar and continued her education in China, where she received a

second master's in Global Affairs.

After completing her degrees, Hardister was awarded the Presidential Management Fellowship, a leadership development program for those with advanced degrees, and she began working for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as a Desk Officer. Her work initially supported staff on various topics, but by mid-2020, Hardister was working to support CDC programs and global health security related to COVID-19.



During her rotation for the Fellowship, Hardister worked in the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Affairs Officer and with the Bureau for Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism.

Ultimately, Hardister missed her public health roots and returned to the CDC in February 2023, where she currently serves as the Special Assistant to the Director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases.

Hardister said that her time at IDM greatly prepared her for the workforce through hands-on practice and interdisciplinary studies, specifically looking at hurricane and tropical storm planning in Georgia and learn what could be improved.

“One of the best things that I grabbed from my experience at IDM was being surrounded by professionals who really emphasized thinking critically and having a growth mindset,” she said.

Hardister says that her professors encouraged her to always search for ways to improve, to anticipate challenges and to learn from past experiences, which she carries with her into her work today building operational capacity to prepare for future infectious disease outbreaks.

Hardister says she likes the idea of taking on responsibility for some bigger challenges in disaster management. “It’s really rewarding to be able to serve the public.”

A portrait of Kiran Thapa, a young man with dark, curly hair and a beard, smiling. He is wearing a dark blue sweater over a collared shirt. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees.

# KIRAN THAPA

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

By Lauren Baggett

**Kiran Thapa, a Ph.D. candidate in epidemiology & biostatistics, studies how adverse experiences in childhood can impact health across the lifespan.**

Thapa says he's always been interested in the ways that social contexts can impact health, and in particular, mental health. While completing a bachelor's degree in public health at Tribhuvan University in Nepal, Thapa was a research assistant on a study evaluating a school-based, culturally-tailored emotion regulation intervention to improve mental health among children who had experienced the massive earthquake that struck Nepal in 2015.

"The experience helped me immerse myself into the world of scientific research and its potential to inform and improve health. I felt the need to pursue higher education and choosing to pursue a Master of Public Health was a no-brainer for me," he said.

Thapa began UGA's MPH program with a concentration in health policy and management in 2018, and since his first year until today, he has worked with faculty and students within the Economic Evaluation Research Group (EERG), led by Janani Rajbhandari-Thapa.

"Being able to constantly engage in work I am passionate about, share progress, get feedback, develop both technical and interpersonal skills has helped a lot in enhancing my learning curve over the years," said Thapa.

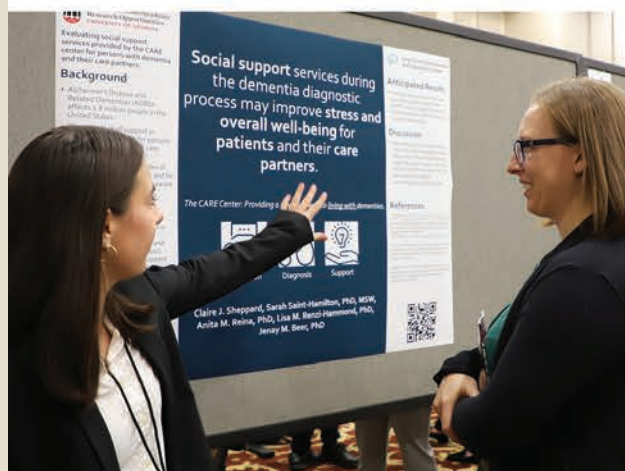
In 2020, Thapa interned with Resilient Georgia, an organization focused on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) prevention and increasing trauma-informed awareness and care delivery through statewide coalitions, leading a narrative review of the availability of information on ACEs and identified data gaps in different national surveys in the U.S.

The work, closely aligned with Thapa's academic interests, inspired his current doctoral research. In 2021, he was co-author with Janani Thapa on a study exploring the links between ACEs and opioid use among young adults in a college setting.

"One of the things that I find particularly exciting about the field of childhood adversity and health is the role of protective factors or resilience in overcoming the negative effects of trauma," he said. "Adversity and resilience interact in many different ways to affect mental health, and we are limited in our understanding of the complex pathways linking these concepts."

Thapa is set to graduate in Spring 2024.









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