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Same goals, different settings

By Nancy Babine, Correspondent

Thu Jan 03, 2008, 02:19 PM EST

BOLTON - Leilani Johnson's life story promises to be a great read. At age 27, Johnson has already served two years in the Peace Corps in Kenya, traveled extensively, earned a master's degree in Public Health (MPH), worked with an international service organization and is now preparing for the next chapter, work abroad as a nurse practitioner.

Johnson, who moved to Bolton at the age of seven, found models of altruism in her own home. Her father served in the Peace Corps in India. Her mother was a special education teacher at the Perkins School.

When Johnson attended Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., where she studied psychology and sociology, her proclivity for service to others was reinforced by the school's focus on social justice and international issues. She became more aware of the needs of the underserved and the uninsured, piquing her interest in health care. Upon graduation, she decided to pursue an advanced degree in Public Health with a concentration in international needs, which she earned at Boston University (BU).

Johnson met Sera Bonds, founder and executive director of Circle of Health International (COHI), while at BU. After Johnson returned from Kenya, she assumed the position of administrative manager of the organization. Besides her participation in COHI, Johnson is taking prerequisite courses before embarking on a Masters Degree program in Nursing Science.

Having just completed her final exams, Johnson spoke about her work with COHI and her future plans.

Q. What have you been doing since you returned from Kenya?

A. For a while I just ran around and visited friends and family, who I hadn't seen in two years, which was really nice. Last spring, I helped teach at BU, one of the complex humanitarian emergency courses they have — looking at refugees and refugee camps, different issues involved with sanitation and HIV/AIDS, maternity and child care.

Q. When you returned from Kenya did you have a clear vision of the next chapter of your life?

A. When I got back I didn't really know what I was going to do. I was looking for work internationally. But having an MPH is a dime a dozen in that field. I was applying for things and getting opportunities, but a lot of the opportunities I was being selectively looked at were for domestic work, rather than international. I really wanted to get back to international again. Then I started hearing about a lot of people getting involved in nursing work or medical school. Actually, one of the visiting professors for that program in the spring tried to get me to go to medical school. I looked into it and thought, "that's a lot more years in school. I'm not sure I'm ready to put in another seven or eight years," so I started looking into nurse practitioner programs. That's what I decided I wanted to pursue to get back into the international field and actually provide hands-on work, in addition to the community-type work that my MPH had prepared me for.

Q. Where will you get your nursing degree?

A. I've applied all over. I've applied to schools out in San Francisco. I'm looking at one of the schools in Hawaii, but they don't start their program until fall of '09. I'm not sure I want to wait that long. And I'm also looking at Boston College. One of the California schools and Boston College are my top two picks.

Q. How long is the program?

A. BC has a two-year program, pretty rigorous and intensive, which I like because I'd be able to get back into the field earlier. Most of them are about three years. Four years, if you really want to specialize in HIV/AIDS or something like that.

Q. Currently, you're working with COHI. What is COHI?

A. [It's] an organization that focuses on providing women and health care professionals with the services they need during crises settings. It started in '04. The executive director, who founded the program, saw a real need for people to focus on women during conflicts and disasters. She found there is a neglect of woman's health services. Things that you'll still need during those conflict kind of times become even more hard to provide in those types of circumstances. Clean, sterile environments to have a child, if it's a complicated pregnancy, and that sort of thing.

Q. Where is COHI involved?

A. They have projects now in Israel, Palestine, Tanzania. They have a project in Tibet. And we're also trying to get into Sudan. Their first huge project was Sri Lanka tsunami relief work.

Q. What is your role?

A. Right now I'm the administrative manager, but having the MPH background, I'm also able to provide input on some of these issues. [I] keep track of COHI monetarily, all of our financials, the donations that are coming in and going out. Also, just sort of fielding requests from people all over the place saying, "I'm interested in volunteering on that project."

Q. From where do grants come?

A. We just got one from a Danish organization, to work on our Palestine project. World Vision was really huge in the Sri Lanka project. And other grants have just been slowly trickling in here and there from different organizations. In addition, COHI does a lot of partnerships with organizations. We're working not just with grant monies, also with supplies and relief goods.

Q. Do you have a central office?

A. Just about everything is Internet based, e-mails and some phone conversations and even a lot of Skype. We do try to meet once a year or so, but it's very hard. The women who are on the board are just amazing and doing phenomenal work. We have one woman on the board from Pakistan, a 70- or 80-year old woman who has been working on woman's health issues ever since she graduated. She's just so interesting and so involved, but it's just so hard to get all of these women together to put them all into one area, but via e-mail everybody does a really neat job of working together and inputting ideas for projects and how to move forward with COHI.

Q. Where do you envision yourself in five or 10 years?

A. I really want to go back abroad. I do think you need to come back for a little while and recondition yourself and get another world view from your home base. Come back; get a grip on things again before going abroad. But I think I'll eventually not want to spend all my time going abroad, and come back to the U.S. There are plenty of needs. Especially with health care, it's getting more and more complicated. I'd like to figure out how I can serve in the US.

Q. Through your experiences with the Peace Corps and COHI, you've seen things most of us never will. What would you like those of us living in the U.S. to know about the needs of people in other countries?

A. You can't push people to see what you see. We were working on contribution cards for COHI during the Christmas holiday season. We wanted to put on pictures of projects we've had abroad, and we wanted to put on some pictures of kids and of mothers and babies, and there was one picture of all these kids and they all had runny noses and their hands were all dirty and I thought, "yeah, that's how the kids look sometimes," but then I thought, "that doesn't look nice on a holiday card."

You want people to know what it's like, but at the same time you don't want people to think that life isn't just as wonderful. I guess that's [what] you want people to know. That the values and the joys in life are all the same throughout the world. Having a baby, doing well at work or stresses of life are the same. The same background, same beliefs, same goals, just in different settings.

Learn more about COHI at cohintl.org. The Nov. 3, 2006, Bolton Common article about Johnson's experiences in the Peace Corps can be found at www.peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/467/2071438.html.

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