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An ex/internship is a crucial element of the Environmental Health Science curriculum at the University of Georgia. Career, internship, and information fairs are held twice a semester campus wide and even occasionally just within the College of

Public Health, under which the Environmental Health Science program is housed. I became aware of the Junior Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program as a freshman. I also quickly ruled it out, thinking this would be something way over my head. Junior year crept up on me, though. I had not come across anything that sounded too exciting, and was about to simply settle on something. Then, two months before the end of the fall semester, USPHS Commissioned Corps Officers came to speak to my Environmental Toxicology class. They even took the time to eat dinner with a handful of students, including me. After that, I started my application process. I knew I may be in for something over my head and that maybe, that would be a good thing.



I was stationed with the Indian Health Service in Tucson, AZ in service of the Pascua Yaqui and Tohono O’Odham nations. I was warned about the heat, monsoon rains, wildlife, and the dismal living conditions that I would witness in some of the villages. Environmental Health Sanitarian, LT Angela Hodge, was my preceptor and “tour guide.” She has an interesting, varied background and was able to teach me lots of things. CDR Don Williams and LT Travis Bowser were also very much a part of my tour of duty. They exposed me to food safety, injury prevention, vector animal control, and general health and safety surveying of public places (pools, hotels, schools, etc.). I had not thoroughly delved into these areas of environmental health in my course of study at school; obviously, this externship enhanced my education a great deal.

Participating in the annual rabies clinic was easily one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve ever had because I felt I was engaged in genuine, if not rudimentary, public health. Rabid animals, including coyotes and bobcats, pose a serious threat to the populations of southern Arizona. Acting as a clinic on wheels, the above mentioned Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) and a team of volunteer Army veterinarians, hit dirt roads leading to over sixty villages all over southern Arizona. Free rabies vaccinations were administered to nearly one thousand cats and dogs of pet owners in need or want of them. This is likely a very small percentage of the total cats and dogs on Pascua Yaqui and Tohono O’Odham lands. Many more roam around the desert as strays, but our 2011 mobile rabies clinic team still made a huge, direct impact on lives. Tribal members do have the option of going into Sells, a “nearby” town, to get their pet vaccinated for free. However, it is no easy task traveling in the desert on underdeveloped roads.



The majority of my time in Tucson was put towards health surveys and inspections of swimming pools, food establishments, school facilities, and the hotel of the casino on the Tohono O’Odham nation—Desert Diamond. Yes, it is as sparkly as it sounds. My viewpoint of health inspectors prior to this externship was probably identical to most people, which is that no one likes to see “the

health inspector” coming. They have their rule book, clipboard, and clickable pens. They are the bearers of bad news with absolutely straight faces. I realized this is silly, at least, in taking part in this critical duty of the EHOs. In this role, they are watchmen and guardians of the public’s good health. Assurance of food safety, especially, is not taken lightly. Besides bi-yearly surveys of food operations, the main tool to prevention of food-borne illnesses is training and educating of food handlers. LT Hodge and CDR Williams teach food handlers classes. I was present at some of the classes, which were especially fun and exciting with lots of participation and discussion.

CDR Williams does a lot of leg work traveling to the different villages of the Nations and giving presentations to the senior citizens about injury prevention, notably fall prevention. He even teaches them some Tai Chi to help build and maintain their balance. The Native American population here faces many health issues, such as diabetes and alcoholism. Poverty compounds these issues and more. The very young and very old, are the ones of utmost concern. I was happy to see the senior citizens actively engaged in the Tai Chi and clearly engaged in extending their projected life expectancy.

I’m quite pleased with the way this externship turned out. I highly recommend it to anyone looking for something different, surprising, and impactful. The people I worked with were kind and generous. They are really invested in their work, as are all USPHS Commissioned Corps Officers. In fact, they will inspire you to be the same way in your future endeavors.