APHN Faculty and Students attend The American Public Health Association (APHA) Annual Meeting and Expo, October 27-31, 2012 in San Francisco, CA

Two APHN faculty members (Dr. Tracy Evanson and Professor Lucy Heintz) and three students (Debbie Swanson, Patty Gerber, and Bonnie Lafromboise) from UND attended the APHA annual meeting in October, 2012. Over 12,000 public health professionals from around the nation and globe attended this year’s meeting. The annual meeting is an excellent opportunity to hear presentations on cutting edge public health research, programs, and policy related issues, as well as network with other professionals. For two of the students, Patty Gerber and Bonnie Lafromboise, this was their first opportunity to attend the APHA annual meeting. They found the experience to be very positive and highly relevant to their work in public health nursing. They had the following information to share.

Bonnie Lafromboise (currently works as a public health nurse at Fond du Lac reservation in Minnesota)

“I have always been interested in prevention and health promotion in my work and in my personal life. One of the session I attended at APHA was related to listening to Native Elders for prevention and promotion.

As a Native American person I am always ready to listen to elder wisdom and the message I hear is one I seem to need to hear at the time. The elders who spoke at the session had some very important messages about the earth, the water and the climate changes. It has always been a traditional teaching to respect the earth and all living beings. When humans take too much and don’t give back or when they pollute and are destructive toward the earth there will be consequences. This is a spiritual law and it is always a very important reminder when it comes from the elders. In this case, elder women spoke from Alaska, Hawaii and the Navaho Nation. Currently, one of the projects I am working with involves biomonitoring which is the testing of people for chemicals. As part of this project, we will be randomly selecting 500 tribal members to test their urine and blood for chemicals. The chemicals we are testing for can be found in the water, fish and food. The area, called the St. Louis Basin, was contaminated over many years by manufacturing and factories and many of the chemicals are still in the water and ground since they don’t breakdown. This can have a devastating effect on living beings. Also, as part of the biomonitoring study we will be measuring peoples’ cholesterol, blood pressure, A1C, and BMI. If any of these areas are found to be high we will be following up with the participants and help them with prevention measures. This is so important in preventing heart disease. At the conference, I also attended one session on cardiovascular health. This information will be important when I am working with this part of the project.

A lot of children in native communities experience situations involving violence and drugs and alcohol. They also live in poverty and experience hunger and neglect. Depression and suicide is on the rise and it is very serious issue. As part of my job I work with children and adolescents in the community, at school and through Child and Teen checkup. I attended the breakout sessions on suicide prevention and protective factors to hear about what others are doing. I was able to obtain information about a program called “HAWK” in which may be helpful in working with children in the Fond du Lac community. After returning from the conference, I shared the “HAWK” program materials with the FDL Prevention and Intervention Program and two local schools who work with native kids.

It was inspirational to listen to Gail Sheehy (key note speaker) talk and to provide copies of her latest book on caregiving. I bought her book and she autographed it. As part of my job, I oversee a Caregiver Grant and because of the grant we are able to provide support services to people who are caregivers in the community. And, finally, it was good to hear Angela Davis (key note speaker) too. We are in an era, I think, were equality of people is being emphasized. It is amazing to me to hear speakers like her who call for equality and acknowledge genocide of people and how important it is to heal from this so we can move on and become a healthy, holistic nation again. She instills hope in people.
This conference was very useful to me in many ways as you can see. The information will be used in my everyday work as a PHN in an American Indian community.”

**Patty Gerber (currently works as a PHN in Olmstead County, Minnesota)**

“The 140th APHA Annual Meeting & Expo was a wonderful, exciting opportunity to learn about public health from experts in the public health field. The theme of Prevention and Wellness Across the Life Span, focusing on wellness across all stages of life, was an appropriate theme in these economic and political times. This theme of prevention begins in the womb.

As a maternal child PHN in a community with a very diverse population, I was fortunate to attend sessions that discussed delivery and postpartum cares of other cultures. When working with pregnant women of other cultures, many have shared with me how their experiences have differed in their home countries. Many times the women have shared that their husband has not been with them during the delivery. This has always puzzled me. Each time I have delivered a baby, I have felt the need to have my husband by my side for support. I wondered why these women did not feel the same way. It was explained that in other cultures, women feel they are showing weakness during child birth. They do not want their husband to see them in a time of weakness. In my mind, giving birth is a beautiful miracle and weakness is nowhere in the process. Gaining this insight was integral to the shift in thinking I needed to serve my clients better. As well as differing cultural practices, one study discussed how countries differ in medical treatment options for medical conditions we readily treat in the United States. It is not always that the treatment is not allowed, but that the treatment is just not available in every country. This provided a frame of reference when serving pregnant clients with fears related to prior experiences in other countries. The knowledge gained from these sessions gives a better understanding of the client’s point of reference. With this knowledge I am better able to serve clients.”