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&A Dr. Shelia Broyles

Behavioral Epidemiologist
and San Diego EXPORT Center Director of Administration

Dr. Shelia Broyles is a true champion of diversity. She uses her love of science to improve the health of people, with special concern for those who cannot afford adequate health care and prevention services. Her collaborative efforts with her colleagues and community partners focus on reducing health disparities among underserved populations, and increasing minority and other understudies groups participation in research.

As the Administrative Core Director for the San Diego Excellence in Partnerships for Community Outreach, Research on Health Disparities and Training (EXPORT) Center and the Program Director for the UCSD School of Medicine, Hispanic Center of Excellence, Broyles has helped support the academic/professional development of Hispanic faculty and medical students, and recruit and support students from all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to work and conduct research in a culturally-diverse society. She's gained support and funding to modify existing health curricula for families of preschoolers to be utilized in previously underserved communities in the South Bay, and helped establish several community and university partnerships to aid early childhood providers in various San Diego communities.

For all of her efforts to promote diversity, Broyles recently received UCSD's Diversity Award. Broyles has dedicated her life to health education and research. She shares why it's so important to her, our university and our communities.

Q Tell me about EXPORT and how the center helps address health disparities.

Broyles: EXPORT is a comprehensive center funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NCMHD). The goals of EXPORT are to increase research focused on health disparities; increase the number of students and training opportunities for students who have a passion for, and who represent groups likely to be affected by, health disparities; to improve and enhance training at all levels of education to address health disparities; to reach out into communities affected by health disparities; to enhance and broaden relationships between those communities and the university; to bring the resources of the university to communities; and to make those communities a priority of the university. That is the focus of the San Diego EXPORT Center, as well as most of the research I've done my entire career.

As the Administrative Core, we provide direction to and take direction from the core directors, investigators, students, faculty, and staff, and provide the infrastructure to accomplish the common goals of EXPORT. We are the liaison with NIH NCMHD to secure and leverage funding to support all the different projects. I'm fortunate to work with researchers in multiple disciplines – sociologists, physicians,

epidemiologists, psychologists, nutrition experts and a broad range of other folks.

Q What kind of health disparities have you seen?

Broyles: Throughout my career, I've worked with investigators in various areas, including physical activity and nutrition behaviors, and the relationship between those behaviors and longevity and mortality associated with heart disease, diabetes and obesity. Most of the communities I've worked in, and that I'm from, are not rural poor, but more urban lower- to middle-class. Most members of these communities are not uninsured but underinsured. The impact of health disparities is not just related to access and treatment, but also in knowledge and behaviors and prevention. That's why it's important to have programs, education and outreach to have the greatest impact on preventable diseases.

Q What changes have you seen to address health disparities?

Broyles: I see the most promise in the university's and researchers' emphasis and interest on reaching communities in various ways, and inviting and embracing innovative research techniques and approaches and community outreach efforts. Seeing that becoming more of a priority in the years that I've been at the university is encouraging. I like that I'm no longer in the minority working in these areas. We've also made a systemwide commitment to put an emphasis and priority on addressing these issues and increasing and enhancing medical education, and increasing diversity, not just racial and ethnic, but diversity in the student population and faculty as well. I definitely believe we're moving in the right direction and have really seen a change over the years.

Q What have you found to be the biggest challenge in addressing health disparities in research and medical care?

Broyles: A lot of the things that have been most rewarding, and where we've seen the most progress, have not been easy. Community-based research is tough. First you have to introduce the concept of community-based participatory research to researchers and students, then you have to engage the community. It takes a lot to convince a community that our emphasis and priorities are aligned with theirs, that we're all facing these issues, and that the issues that concern them, concern us. You have to earn their respect and you have to establish your place in the community as an advocate and a member of the community yourself.

It doesn't fit the typical research model. This is not the scientific method that you can apply to laboratory research. It takes a lot of time and resources. It's also far more rewarding to be able to feel and see your impact. And the change comes slowly. When you're trying to encourage healthier behaviors, it will take a while before you see the impact of those efforts.

One of the most rewarding aspects, for me, is to be invited back. To go in and do research or a type of health assessment or just a simple survey, and then to have a community member ask me to help them address a problem. That, to me, is by far a bigger accomplishment than knowing I published in the right journal. I think if you're really passionate and your heart is set on improving the health status of a community, then you need to make yourself part of that community first – if not an actual member, at least a trusted advocate.

Q Tell me about your background and what drew you into the field of science - psychology and epidemiology in particular?

Broyles: I've always had an interest in math and science, and I've wanted to be a researcher as long as I can remember. But I'm not from a background with college educated professionals, and didn't have a lot of exposure to scientists or physicians. I didn't know what an epidemiologist was until I was in college. But I've always liked science and I always wanted to take that path.

I've also always felt there wasn't enough being done to improve health status and health knowledge. I grew up around a lot of people who had treatable and preventable diseases. I think most people take for granted that they have access to things like dental work and vision care. I saw glaring examples of health disparities. And I realized how much more we, as a society, could do to improve the health of everyone, not just treat, but prevent a lot of the health problems that impact people and their happiness.

So it seemed natural that I needed to be a scientist of some sort. I chose psychology, and in particular cognitive and social psych, because I found the study of how and why we "know," "believe" and "behave" intriguing. I later discovered my interest in medicine and sought avenues for applying my prior education and interests to the study of health status, behaviors that impact health, and the causes of and approaches to eliminating health disparities.

Q This year, you received the UCSD Diversity Award. How did it feel to be recognized for your efforts to improve and promote diversity?

Broyles: I was honored. It is very special to be honored by the university and the Chancellor. It was an interesting feeling though, because I feel so passionate and involved in what I do as my job, that it's not just my job. There is no hard line that defines who I am versus what I do. These are the things that are important and I wouldn't be here if I couldn't address these issues. Also, the "UCSD Principles of Community" aren't different from the principles that I brought to the university. These principles are engrained so they have a lot of meaning for me.

Q Why is diversity important to you?

Broyles: I see diversity as our greatest strength as a human race. I can think of nothing more important than exploring that issue as a society, regardless of our race, ethnicity or religious beliefs. It's important that we find a way for all of us to see diversity as a strength, and not a burden or a negative. Everything we do and see is enhanced or improved by diversity. For example, if you were looking at a painting, if it only had one color, how rich would it be? That is oversimplified, but the value of diversity is not something easily put into words.

As a scientist, looking at all the variability in nature that exists in the world, it is evident that if variability wasn't there, a lot of things wouldn't exist, persist or evolve. The variability I see in science and nature translates to the diversity I see in people. I really cannot imagine what it would be like to not have diversity.

I have suffered negative effects my entire life from being exposed to people and circumstances where diversity is not accepted and is a bad thing. And I have, in my own way, done what I can to address that. I think everyone should. When the university embraces students, faculty, staff and the community from all walks of life, from all areas, it makes the university a lot stronger and it makes everything we do better. It makes us better scientists and teachers, and helps us do what needs to be done to improve society as a whole. I think there is no greater challenge, but there is also no greater benefit in getting society to embrace diversity. We only have to gain by understanding.

Q What are you most proud of?

Broyles: I'm most proud of being able to get here, to the place where I can do the job that I do. It was a tough road. We all have our struggles, barriers and challenges, and I had a lot. But I stayed focused, and I think truly believing that I could make a difference and serve the greater good was a huge motivating factor. Being treated like I didn't fit in only made me stronger. It wasn't easy and I did it anyway, so that's what I'm most proud of.

Q If you could pass on any piece of advice to the next generation, what would it be?

Broyles: My practical advice to a young scientist would be to actively seek mentors for professional and social support. Identify and pursue financial opportunities to support your program in a strategic manner. Aggressively pursue opportunities for professional development in the institution as well as locally, regionally and nationally. Many resources are available (and you can create opportunities) but you must expend the effort needed to find them – not all opportunities will find you!

My philosophical advice is to set your goals high, but don't be idealistic about their pursuit. Your experiences are sure to range from exhilarating and enriching to frustration, humbling and very difficult. Not everyone will understand or appreciate that it is our cultural, ethnic, economic, social and philosophical differences and life experiences that shape us and provide the framework for what and how we build knowledge. Our diversity and unique perspectives enrich our social, academic and professional environments. By bringing our unique perspectives to academia, we increase the breadth of approaches to problems and the development of innovative solutions; and contribute to the richness of the experience for everyone who participates. Embrace that belief, look for and acknowledge instances when it is revealed. Doing so will not lessen the sting from bad experiences (and there will be some), but it will reinforce the value of your participation – you not only should have the opportunity to pursue careers in science, your participation enriches the scientific community.

Q Tell me about the project you're working on now?

Broyles: We received a contract through the First 5 Commission of San Diego to deliver a program targeting South Bay families, predominantly low-income, low-literacy, first- and second-generation Latinos. We're training health educators to deliver a nutrition and physical activity curriculum for parents with children ages 2-4. It teaches parents about health behaviors and eating habits, in addition to nutrition, such as ways to make the home environment healthier for eating, like turning the television off and having family meals together. The program has the potential to reach over 1,200 families. So it's very rewarding to me to be able to continue to develop, deliver and evaluate programs, not just for research's sake, but to actually go into the communities and help a lot of families.