Public Health Doctoral Student Puts Dream of Resilient Communities into Action

Back in 2014 Wendy Ellis never dreamed she’d be pursuing a doctoral degree in public health and soon leading an innovative project to build healthy, resilient communities in five cities around the United States.

At the time, she’d just been awarded a Michael and Lori Milken Public Health Scholarship, a program funded by a $10 million gift from the Milken Family Foundation. And she was working as the manager of child health policy for the Washington, DC office of Nemours, a non-profit children’s health system.

Flash forward to 2016: Ellis attends classes at Milken Institute School of Public Health (Milken Institute SPH), works full-time at Nemours and recently landed an $800,000 grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to launch an innovative new project called Building Community Resilience (BCR).

Ellis serves as a Co-Principal Investigator of BCR, along with William Dietz, MD, PhD, Director and Chair of the Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness at Milken Institute SPH. Together, Ellis and Dietz are building the BCR initiative, which is aimed at finding solutions for the stressful and unhealthy environments that affect many children and families living in vulnerable neighborhoods, including the District of Columbia.

Ellis has long been interested in helping children overcome adversity.

Before her career in public health, Ellis had worked for 15 years in broadcast journalism and was covering a child abuse case in Seattle when she learned about a young girl who had been failed by the system. The case affected her deeply and in 2009 she realized she wanted to get involved so she enrolled and ultimately earned a Master of Public Health at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Research she conducted while an MPH student at University of Washington helped her realize that many children are living in unhealthy or even dangerous communities and they are at high risk for many serious health problems. At the same time, Ellis discovered that many pediatricians or primary care providers could treat a child’s medical conditions but didn’t have the tools or training to connect a child’s family to community services that could address social/environmental problems, such as homelessness, hunger or even violence.

After earning her Master of Public Health, Ellis moved to Washington, DC and began working at Nemours. She got to put her education in action there but Ellis had a vision of changing the world one child at a time. For that, there’s no better place than Milken Institute School of Public Health.

She’s working steadily at earning her doctorate of public health but along the way she’s also leading the BCR Initiative, which is now operating in Washington, DC; Wilmington, Delaware; Dallas, Texas; Portland, Oregon and Cincinnati, Ohio.

In each place, Ellis hopes that the connections established between the primary care providers and churches, government offices and community service organizations will help fill the gaps for children who are struggling to get enough to eat, find a safe place to sleep and other basics of staying healthy.
Part of that formula for success is a reduction in a child’s stress levels and good old fashioned support from the community and family members.

Ellis knows how important that support can be: She grew up with grandparents who gave her not only a safe and loving place to be in the world but also made sure she had plenty of healthy food and opportunities. They lived in a neighborhood that had plenty of safe places to play, summer camps and top-notch public schools.

“My grandparents and the community came together to help lift me up so that I could move forward,” Ellis says, adding that she wants to build such healthy communities not just in the five cities that already have a BCR network but in neighborhoods across the country. “For me, this is an issue of social justice. I want to use what I’ve been given to help build strong, resilient neighborhoods so that all kids have the chance to thrive.”