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Making strides in public health

Grad nets first master's degree of its kind at UNLV

By Christina Littlefield <clittle@lasvegassun.com>

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When 24-year-old Stacey Rapp earns her master's degree today at UNLV's winter commencement ceremony at the Thomas & Mack Center, it will be a milestone for her, her school and the university, professors said.

As the first student to successfully complete the master's degree in public health, Rapp is a pioneer in the one-year-old School of Public Health.

As a graduate assistant, Rapp oversaw an initiative to promote firefighter health and well-being and helped state lawmakers make healthier choices during the 2005 Legislature, her professors said.

She's also spent the last three months researching the status of care for breast cancer patients in Southern Nevada for the Las Vegas affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

The community profile Rapp is developing will help Komen decide where there are cracks in the care available and where money raised by the foundation needs to go, Rapp said. The in-depth report also doubles as her final project to earn her degree.

Her graduation will help the school recruit more students and expand the program as well as pursue accreditation, professors Shawn Gerstenberger and Chuck Regin said.

Rapp graduates with a stream of accomplishments that illustrate what the school is all about, the professors said, researching and improving public health issues affecting various segments of the community and training new professionals who will be able to positively impact those issues.

"The purpose of a school of public health anywhere in the country is to provide leadership and solutions to improving health and reducing disease frequency," Regin said.

Formed in August 2004 as part of a complete reorganization of UNLV's health sciences programs, the School of Public Health was created to meet the need to train more public health administrators, researchers and teachers and to advance UNLV's own research goals, officials said.

The school pulled in two master's degrees programs already offered, one in health promotion and the other in health administration, and developed master's degrees in biostatistics, epidemiology, and environmental health sciences, said Gerstenberger, chairman of the environmental health department. The school also incorporates several research centers looking at such things as health disparities among minorities and children's health issues.

Rapp, who earned her bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, transferred from the previous health promotion program into the School of Public Health in January 2005.

The master's degree in public health is also considered more prestigious by other universities and better suited her plans to eventually pursue a doctorate in epidemiology or environmental health, Rapp said.

It was her previous experience as a nursing assistant in home health care that led her to want to work on the prevention and education side in public health rather than studying to be a medical doctor, Rapp said. At the state her patients were in, doctors could only treat the symptoms.

"I really wanted to stop the problem before it got to that level," Rapp said.

Both of the initiatives Rapp worked on included both prevention and education efforts and were designed to connect the university's research to the community, Regin said.

The firefighter initiative Rapp worked on is part of an ongoing study looking at the health of firefighters and how to mitigate the high rate of cardiovascular disease affecting firefighters across the country, said Regin, the director of the office of research and development for Firefighter Wellness and Fitness.

Rapp was a leader on the project in developing and presenting information to firefighters to help them improve their health, including conducting a survey of their eating habits and designing an online workout guide for the firefighters, Regin said.

The project has been so successful that Assemblyman John Oceguera, D-Las Vegas, a battalion chief for North Las Vegas, asked UNLV to create a wellness program for state lawmakers this past spring, Regin said. Oceguera said he regularly gains 10 to 15 pounds during a legislative session and wanted to avoid that.

Rapp helped put together 100 choices lawmakers could make to improve their diet, their physical fitness, or their mental health, from not eating fries at lunch to walking during breaks to taking time out to play with their kids. About 100 lawmakers and others working in Carson City actively participated in the

initiative.

Both programs have brought health to the forefront of people's minds and helped them make better choices, Ocegüera said.

"It's a great way for the university to get out in front and help the community," Ocegüera said.

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