Nightingale News

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Crossing the Finish Line: Reflecting on a Year of Health Equity

When I started this fellowship, I was constantly wondering if I belonged in the room. I dreaded public speaking, stayed quiet whenever I could, and often felt like everyone around me knew more than I did. Somewhere along the way, that changed. I stopped walking into rooms hoping someone would give me permission to be there and started walking in knowing I had earned my seat at the table too.

My confidence grew, but not because public speaking suddenly became easy. It grew because I realized the work was never about me. Every presentation and every workshop with a community member reminded me that someone in that room might leave knowing something that could improve their health or even change their life. When I shifted my focus from worrying about myself to serving others, speaking became less intimidating and much more meaningful.

Looking back, the relationships I built throughout this fellowship are what I'll carry with me the most. Whether I was working with church leaders, refugee families, older adults, volunteers, or community partners, every conversation taught me something. Trust isn't built during one presentation or one health fair. It's built by showing up over and over again. By listening before speaking. By remembering names. By keeping your promises. That's something no classroom could have taught me.

Before this fellowship, I knew health disparities existed because I had studied them. Now I've seen them. I've listened to families talk about choosing between medications and groceries. I've met refugees trying to navigate a healthcare system in a completely new country. I've watched communities of color share why they're hesitant to trust healthcare after years of being overlooked. Those experiences reminded me that education is powerful, but trust is what allows education to make a difference.

"Success isn't about how much money you make. It's about the difference you make in people's lives."
— Michelle Obama

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Learning From Leaders: Seeing Healthcare Through a Different Lens

One of the biggest lessons I learned during this fellowship was that healthcare extends far beyond the patient exam room. As a pharmacy graduate and public health fellow, I had spent years learning about patient care, but I had never really seen everything that happens behind the scenes to make that care possible. That changed when I had the opportunity to shadow Jeff Joyner, President of Sentara Northern Virginia Medical Center, through Dr. John's Leadership in Action Series.

Throughout the day, I sat in on leadership huddles, listened as teams discussed overnight updates, patient flow, and daily operations, and watched how different departments worked together to solve problems in real time. One moment that really stuck with me was watching a nurse receive a DAISY Award. Even in the middle of a busy day, everyone stopped to recognize the compassion and dedication she showed her patients. It was a reminder that great leadership isn't just about managing operations. It's also about making sure people feel valued.



Pictured: Dr. Demery during her shadowing experience with Sentara.

Walking away from that experience, I gained a whole new appreciation for healthcare leadership. It reminded me that improving patient care takes far more than clinical knowledge. It takes communication, teamwork, and leaders who create an environment where every member of the healthcare team can succeed. Seeing that side of healthcare challenged me to think beyond my own profession and showed me that meaningful change happens when everyone is working toward the same goal.

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Meeting Communities Where They Are

One of the greatest lessons this fellowship taught me was that every community has different needs, but they all deserve the same compassion and respect. Before people are willing to listen, they first need to know that you genuinely care.

One experience that especially stayed with me was serving as a pharmacist at PAVE (Providing Access to Vaccines for Everyone), a vaccination clinic that became a regular part of my fellowship alongside my colleague, Dr. Anwari. Through a partnership between NOVA ScriptsCentral, Mason and Partners at George Mason University, and Fairfax County Public Schools, we helped children who were new to the United States get caught up on the vaccines they needed before starting school.



Pictured: Dr. Anwari, Dr. Demery, and our student Sharon at PAVE Clinic

My role included reviewing vaccine records, administering immunizations, and counseling families, but I quickly realized that sometimes the most important part of my job wasn't giving the vaccine. It was helping children feel safe.

I remember one little boy who was terrified of getting his shot. Instead of focusing on the vaccine, I asked him what he was most excited to experience now that he was in the United States. As he started talking, I could see his nervousness begin to fade. That moment reminded me that before we can care for someone's health, we have to care about the person sitting in front of us. Ever since then, I've tried to make that my approach with every patient. We already look intimidating enough in our scrubs, so I always try to start every interaction with a smile and a conversation before anything else.

The Power of Feeling Seen

Another experience that reinforced this lesson was working with the Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), which supports refugee families from many different countries as they adjust to life in the United States.

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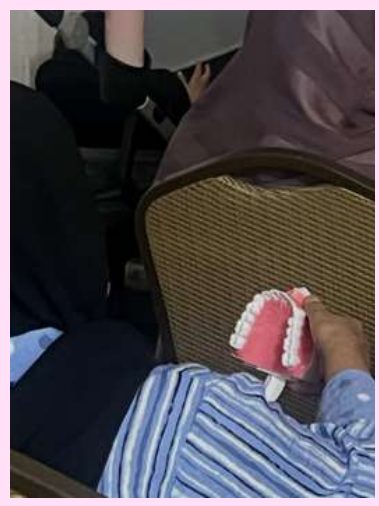
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During a dental health education event, I helped facilitate activities for the children while their parents attended an educational session led by a dentist who spoke Dari. In another room, a dental assistant taught the children proper brushing techniques through fun, interactive activities.

Although I couldn't understand the language being spoken, I didn't need to. I could see the impact it had on the families. There was a sense of comfort and trust that came from hearing important health information in their own language. It reminded me that education is most powerful when people feel seen, understood, and included. That experience reinforced something I'll carry with me throughout my career: access to healthcare isn't just about providing services. It's also about making sure people can truly understand and connect with the information they're receiving.







Pictured: Members of our Afghan refugee community learning about the importance of oral health.

Building Healthy Communities Together

One of the most meaningful parts of my fellowship was becoming more involved with Project HEALUS (Helping to Empower Active Living Within the U.S.), a community health initiative through the A.M.E. Zion Health Ministry. I was first introduced to the project at the beginning of my fellowship, but just a few months before it ended, I was asked to step into the role of Project Coordinator. At first, I was nervous. I wanted to make sure I could support the team, contribute in a meaningful way, and not hold anyone back. Looking back now, saying yes was one of the best decisions I made.

As Project Coordinator, I've had the opportunity to create educational materials, coordinate Health Hub sessions, and work closely with pastors, nurses, pharmacists, and our trusted messengers. Building those relationships has been one of the most rewarding parts of this experience. Every meeting, training session, and conversation reminded me that improving health starts with people who genuinely care about their communities and are willing to serve them.



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The most rewarding part, though, has been watching our trusted messengers grow in confidence. Seeing someone who was once hesitant to lead a health discussion now confidently educate members of their congregation feels like a proud parent moment. It's been incredible to watch them realize the impact they can have within their own communities. Project HEALUS showed me that some of the most meaningful changes in healthcare don't always happen inside a clinic or hospital. Sometimes they begin in places where people already feel safe, supported, and heard. That lesson is one I'll carry with me throughout my career.

A.M.E.Z. HEALTH MINISTRY

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A Fellowship Graduation to Remember

As my fellowship came to a close, my co-fellows, preceptors, and I gathered at the APhA headquarters in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the end of an incredible year. It was a day filled with gratitude, reflection, and a mix of emotions. I felt proud of how far I had come, excited for what lies ahead, and, if I'm being honest, a little nervous too. One of the moments I'll always remember was hearing Dr. John's words during the ceremony. Knowing that someone who had invested so much in my growth believed in me meant more than I can put into words. When I think back to the person who started this fellowship a year ago, I almost don't recognize her. I walked in unsure of myself, hesitant to speak up, and constantly questioning whether I belonged. Today, I leave more confident, more willing to embrace new opportunities, and more certain that I have something meaningful to contribute. This fellowship challenged me in ways I never expected, but it also gave me experiences and relationships that will stay with me for the rest of my career.



Pictured: Jadyn, Dr. Anwari, Dr. Demery, and Dr. John celebrating Dr. Demery's fellowship graduation!

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NOVA Scripts Central RX

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Looking Ahead!

As I move into the next stage of my career, I'm excited to continue building on the work I began during this fellowship. I'll be continuing my role as Project Coordinator with the A.M.E. Zion Health Ministry, where I'll support Project HEALUS by creating community health education materials, coordinating program activities, and training Trusted Messengers to better serve their communities. Seeing the impact of this work firsthand has reinforced my passion for making health information more accessible and empowering communities to take charge of their health.



Pictured: Dr. Charys Demery wearing a NSC polo

I'm also excited to begin a new role with Clinic Hub, where I'll work in data analytics to support free and charitable clinics across the country. I'll have the opportunity to help develop digital health tools, analyze data to improve clinic operations, and identify ways to strengthen care for underserved populations. While this role is different from the community engagement work I've done throughout the fellowship, it shares the same goal of improving access to quality healthcare through innovation and collaboration.

I leave this fellowship with a stronger foundation, a broader perspective, and a network of mentors and colleagues who have supported and inspired me every step of the way. I am especially grateful to Dr. Donney John, Dr. Shabnum Anwari, my fellow co-fellows, and everyone at NOVA ScriptsCentral and APhA for believing in me and helping shape the healthcare professional I am becoming. Although this fellowship has come to an end, its impact will stay with me throughout my career, and I look forward to carrying these lessons forward as I continue working to advance health equity, strengthen communities, and improve access to care.

THANK YOU FOR READING!