

# Teaching Global Health from a Global Citizen's Perspective

As a child growing up in Sri Lanka, Mercy College Adjunct Instructor Shalini Eragoda, MSPH, perceived most of the people in her environment — her family, neighbors and school friends — as belonging to a world where all were treated the same. At the age of seven, when she and her family emigrated to Los Angeles, California, that perception changed.



“Growing up in L.A. as a Sri Lankan immigrant, it was clear to me, even as a child, that not all people are afforded equal opportunity in the U.S.,” she said. Although her parents both held jobs and believed in the importance of a good education for her and her brother, Eragoda said that she saw her parents struggling financially and trying to adapt. Throughout her childhood the family periodically visited Sri Lanka. “It opened my eyes to how privileged and lucky we were to be living in America,” she said.

For the past year, Eragoda has

been teaching Global Health, a course at Mercy College that introduces students to public health fundamentals, including the socio-economic, cultural and environmental determinants of health. “There’s an important difference between health equality and health justice,” she said. “As first articulated in 1946 by the World Health Organization, health care is a universal right, yet access to it is not universally available to every person. In this course, we discuss the systemic barriers which hinder disadvantaged populations from achieving equal access to care.”

Before coming to Mercy, Eragoda spent several years pursuing her studies toward a career in global health. After earning a bachelor’s degree in public health, global poverty and practice from the University of California, Berkeley, she went on to receive a master’s degree in public health and international health from Johns Hopkins University. Eragoda will be defending her doctoral dissertation at Tulane University’s School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine this fall.

During her college years, she engaged in several service-learning opportunities at home and abroad that helped open her eyes to health care disparities all over the world. In Sri Lanka, while teaching English in a remote village, Eragoda worked with local public health inspectors to set up mobile clinics that provide routine health care services for people with limited access to health systems. Domestically, she worked with the homeless population in Northern California, recruiting health care providers to volunteer and provide much-needed social and health services. More recently, she worked



(left to right) Eragoda, global health expert Paul Farmer and Robert Miyashiro

on an initiative focused on improving developmental outcomes in young children affected by HIV and AIDS in Eastern and Southern Africa.

“Being on the ground in Kibera, the largest informal settlement in Africa, and seeing first-hand what these communities face — the lack of even the most basic necessities like adequate housing and access to water and electricity — redefined my approach to teaching global health,” she said. “Working hand-in-hand with communities to solve public health issues is important. We need to understand the needs of a community from their perspective and build on the community’s strengths to have locally owned and sustainable solutions. As a comfortable, educated American, it’s important for me to recognize my limitations. That’s what makes a global citizen.”

In addition to being an adjunct instructor at Mercy, Eragoda is currently an independent senior research analyst for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance (formerly known as



Eragoda conducting a site visit in Kenya in 2017 for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Photos provided by Shalini Eragoda

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the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization) reporting on financing for global COVID-19 vaccine delivery support. “Gavi provides funding for vaccine rollouts in high priority countries, supporting health care systems to meet their targets for vaccinating their population,” she explained. She hopes her team’s findings can be utilized by Gavi to identify and address financial gaps to accelerate equitable vaccine distribution across low and low-middle income countries.

With her students at Mercy College, Eragoda shares what she has learned from her experiences, hoping to broaden their horizons as well. “What is relevant in terms of health care in New York might not be relevant in Sri Lanka,” she said. “I try to teach students to think like global citizens, understanding

not just the American health system, but also how health systems — and health professionals — function elsewhere in the world. The pandemic has shown us how connected we truly are. Every person deserves culturally competent health care regardless of their socio-economic status or place of residence.”

She is pleased to see how Mercy is changing, too, in ways that enhance the student experience and their impact. “Last year, my class consisted predominantly of first-generation students and students of color. They brought so much to class discussions from their own lived experiences. “The fact that Mercy provides this opportunity for students who might otherwise remain underserved, enabling them to add their voices and empower themselves to give back to their own community, is amazing,” she said.