Jessica Marinoff (D’10) looked out at the faces in her seminar audience, a group of summer campers from a North Philadelphia homeless shelter. They were there to learn about effective oral hygiene, and Ms. Marinoff knew that to reach them her presentation would have to be dynamic and fun. Soon all of the kids were wearing gloves and masks as they learned about dental exams, and there were smiles all around.

Meanwhile, across town, Allison Clark (D’10) was also hard at work, traveling some of Philadelphia’s toughest streets in the MOMobile minivan, engaging young mothers in discussions about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, smoking cessation, and good nutrition, and setting up free cribs for babies in need.

It was the summer of ’07, and Ms. Marinoff and Ms. Clark were in the midst of their seven-week internships through Bridging the Gaps, one of many community service learning program options available for Penn Dental Medicine students. Ms. Marinoff was assigned to the Dental Center at Eleventh Street Family Health Services, a nurse run facility in North Philadelphia. In her internship program, Jessica was responsible for addressing a different audience from this community each week, from new mothers in neonatal programs to kids at summer camp. Ms. Clark’s assignment was with Cribs for Kids, a component of the city’s Maternity Care Coalition, which focuses on delivering cribs and education to families at risk for SIDS in Philadelphia.

For both students, the work was physically and mentally challenging, taking them outside the comfort zone of Penn, where they were used to dealing with other dental students and professors, and introducing them to the real faces of community healthcare. It was an education they could not have received in any classroom.
A Culture of Community Service
Since the early 1990s, service has been an integral part of a Penn Dental Medicine education. Currently, 70 hours of community work are part of four required courses at each year of the dental curriculum: eight hours the first year, six hours the second year, 16 hours the third year, and 40 hours the fourth year. “We view community service learning activities as integral to the dental student experience at Penn,” explains Dr. Joan Gluch, Director of Community Health at Penn Dental Medicine.

In addition, she notes that students bring a fresh sense of energy to community work, and provide additional manpower for community organizations whose resources are often limited. In return, students gain new skills, valuable contacts, an appreciation for the real world of work, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of the challenges facing many individuals in the community.

“Through community-based activities, our students get to know individuals in the community and what they face on a daily basis,” Dr. Gluch says. “By walking in the shoes of their potential patients, they have a chance to see them as real people.”

Give and Take Across All Disciplines
The real-world experiences and rewards that students receive from the Bridging the Gaps Community Health Internship Program and other community experiences are balanced by the positive effects their work has on the communities they serve, whose members learn the principles and practice of caring not only for their teeth and gums, but for all aspects of their health. It is this idea of ‘give and take’, as well as the desire to create an interdisciplinary community service experience, that inspired the founding of Bridging the Gaps in 1991, says Dr. Gluch.

“Bridging the Gaps started out as a School of Medicine program; however, in its third year, faculty members began to look at community experiences for their students with an eye toward developing an interdisciplinary approach,” she explains. “When the dental school was invited to participate, we accepted eagerly.” Bridging the Gaps originated at Penn, but is now a multi-institutional collaboration, which in Philadelphia includes Drexel, Jefferson, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, and Temple. Students from Bryn Mawr, LaSalle, and University of the Sciences also participate. Over the years, the Philadelphia program has been disseminated to Pittsburgh, Erie, New Jersey, and Delaware, and has been recognized by the American College of Physicians and the American Red Cross, among others.

True to its mission, Bridging the Gaps brings many disciplines together — dental students in a placement might work not only with students from other schools, but with students from other fields as well. Medical, dental, and nursing students come together with students in social policy and practice and even art therapy, sharing the unique perspectives on patient care that their disciplines provide. Placements for Penn Dental Medicine this year included 10 community service organizations throughout the city (see page 13, for a complete list). In addition to working with their host organizations, students also attend weekly seminars led by community health and social professionals.
service professionals to hone their newfound skills and develop a deeper understanding of important community issues.

“Students who participate in Bridging the Gaps experience communities through the eyes of their residents, while working and learning with their future health and social service professional colleagues,” says Lucy Tuton, Executive Director of Bridging the Gaps citywide. “As a result, students broaden their definition of what constitutes health. They gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors that impact physical well-being and gain skills in collaboration with diverse partners that can only strengthen their professional development.”

Through community-based activities, our students get to know individuals in the community and what they face on a daily basis.

DR. JOAN GLUCH
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY HEALTH

New Perspectives on Dental Care

“When I was looking at dental schools, I chose Penn Dental Medicine because I wanted my patient community to be as diverse as possible,” remembers Ms. Clark. “I was eager to explore Philadelphia’s communities, and Bridging the Gaps offered the means to do so in an academic and meaningful way.” Through her internship, she has gained skills and built relationships that will serve her throughout her career.

Ms. Marinoff agrees. A year after her internship ended, she is using the experiences she took away from her Bridging the Gaps assignment every day. “From my fieldwork and through the weekly seminars I learned that a person’s health status may be affected by so many factors: living conditions, neighborhood, family structure, age, race, education, activity level, violence, literacy, employment status, income, and so many more things that are not always apparent at first,” she says. Her experience, though short in length, has influenced the way she approaches her coursework and ultimately, the way she will practice dentistry.

This past summer, a new crop of Penn Dental Medicine students gained similar benefits at Bridging the Gaps placements throughout the city. One of these was Keren Levine (D’11) who worked at the Myers Recreation Center and The Health Annex, a community health clinic serving the uninsured and underinsured of Southwest Philadelphia. There, she taught health lessons on safety topics to children ages two to 12. Levine also helped The Health Annex implement a community health fair.

“Before this experience, I never thought about community dentistry per se,” Levine says. “However, I am now interested in doing more community service this year, and down the road I see myself possibly working at a community clinic once a week. I went into dentistry because I wanted to help people in need, and community dentistry would be a great atmosphere in which to do that.” Levine’s Bridging the Gaps internship has also inspired her to organize a community service project through Penn Dental Medicine’s fraternity, Psi Omega.
This past summer, Penn Dental Medicine students took part in Bridging the Gaps internships at the following sites throughout the city:

- **Children’s Crisis Treatment Center**: addresses the effects of abuse, neglect, traumatic events, and other challenges to early childhood development.
- **Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY)**: develops and implements health advocacy programs for children in the Philadelphia region.
- **11th Street Family Health Services Dental Clinic**: a community health center that provides affordable and convenient health care.
- **Maternity Care Coalition Cribs for Kids**: supplies cribs and offers educational programs regarding safe sleep practices, safe cribs, and other health programs of interest to new parents.
- **The Health Annex and Myers Recreation Center**: a neighborhood health center offering comprehensive health, education, and social services on a sliding fee scale.
- **Consortium Chestnut Club House and PRIDE (People Rediscovering Independence, Dignity and Excellence) Program**: provides support and education for adults who have recently undergone psychiatric hospitalization.
- **Cobbs Creek Primary Care Center of the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia**: a neighborhood health center that provides high-quality pediatric health and education programs to local residents.
- **Brother Rousseau Academy**: an intensive, community-based day treatment program for court-committed, pre-adolescent males and females.
- **Hall Mercer Child and Family Unit**: a health, education, and training program for residents with mental health and retardation issues.
- **Health Federation Early Head Start**: a child development and family support program for pregnant women and families with children from birth to 3 years of age.

"My experience with Bridging the Gaps was a great influence not only on my post-graduate career decision to stay involved in public health, but also on my relationship with Philadelphia communities,” she explains. “With greater understanding of the city’s needs and expectations, as well as behavioral patterns and some of its struggles, my choice to continue serving these communities was seamless and comfortable. I still explore and learn from the communities where I work, a relationship that began during the summer of 2004 through Bridging the Gaps.”

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**A Career-Shaping Experience**

Sometimes, Bridging the Gaps makes such an indelible mark on a student that it literally shapes her future. When Dr. Carina Wohl (D’07) was a student at Penn Dental Medicine, she spent a summer as a Bridging the Gaps intern, working with the Injury Free Coalition of Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and Neighborhood Bike Works on projects relating to mobile safety throughout the city. Now, in her new position as part of the dental team at Southwest Philadelphia’s Health Annex, she feels she has come full circle in this community-oriented practice.

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**I went into dentistry because I wanted to help people in need, and community dentistry would be a great atmosphere in which to do that.**

**Keren Levine (D’11)**

2008 BRIDGING THE GAPS INTERN