

News Release

For U of M Crookston Senior Delali Degbey, a Focus on Women and Children Runs through It All

By Itolfe on Wednesday, April 8, 2015 If there is a theme that runs through the life of Senior Delali Degbey, it is centered on the health of women and children. The applied studies major from Lome, Togo, came to the University of Minnesota Crookston with healthcare experience.

Following her high school graduation, Degbey sat for a national exam. The exam, which is taken by as many as 10,000 other students, allows only 55 students into the official three-year program to train as a midwife, and Degbey was one of them. Training as a midwife was a growth experience for her. Dealing daily with the fragility of human life was intense and helped to set her on her future course.

"My interest in maternal health is something near to my heart," she says. "I have been active in the area of women's and children's health for a long time. It is the reason I want to follow my bachelor's degree with a master's degree in public health focused on women and children." Degbey arrived at the U of M Crookston in January 2012 and spent her first semester learning English. "I looked at schools where French was the primary language, but I discovered the University of Minnesota in my search for universities," she says. "I originally wanted to major in health management and found the Crookston campus the most economical one in the system with the major I wanted."

Learning English was a challenge. "It was frustrating at times, but when you are surrounded by people speaking English, you have to learn it," she says. "Kim Gillette, director of International Programs told me that when I had my first dream in English, I would know I was getting it. It took six months, but I remember the first time I had a dream in English." Today, her mastery of the language is remarkable.

In fall 2013, she took her first class with Associate Professor Sharon Stewart in nutrition. "I found Sharon to be easy for me to work with, and we were both interested in the health and well-being of women and children," Degbey says. "She has been so helpful and given me clear direction on what I will need at the graduate level. Not only do we have shared interests, but she has been really invested in my dream."

Last fall, Degbey approached Stewart about the possibility of an undergraduate research project. "In all my classes, I used opportunities when it was appropriate to research, write, and present on issues related to women," Degbey explains. "I also had an opportunity to work with Polk County Public Health and with Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). This focus of mine on women's health is the thread that runs through everything in my life."

With that in mind, Stewart encouraged Degbey to come up with a topic related to women's health. With some investigation, Degbey decided she would look at an issue related to lactation and her study proposal "Supportive Environment for Breastfeeding in the Workplace" took shape.

"For some additional help, I went back to visit with Polk County Public Health," Degbey says. "They helped me broaden my subject and gave me some really good ideas around the topic."

Over the months and through regular meetings with Stewart, Degbey has busied herself researching articles in the field including the study of both federal and state laws regarding lactation rooms in the workplace. "My hypothesis is that when lactation rooms are provided, women are more likely to breast feed longer," she says.

With recent approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Minnesota, Degbey is preparing to send out an electronic survey that will give her important data needed to understand and perhaps draw some conclusions about the availability and importance of lactation rooms in the workplace.

"My examination of the literature shows that within six months of birth, two-thirds of mothers have returned to work," she says. "But many times, women find the workplace a barrier to their choice to breast feed. I want to find out if lactation rooms make a difference."

Degbey says the study of breastfeeding is huge but the topic is being talked about more on the research level than you actually hear about it in public. That fact adds value to the practical work she is doing with Stewart, and while this study stays focused on the local community, it is setting Degbey up for future research in graduate school.

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In the photos: Delali Degbey at right and Sharon Stewart with Degbey at left.



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