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# Training the Next Generation of Rural Health Care Providers

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By Robin Roenker

FRONTIER NURSING UNIVERSITY®





Members of the 2019 cohort of Frontier Nursing University's Courier Program relax at the Bluegrass Festival in Hyden, Kentucky. The service-learning experience brought nine participants — eight from the U.S. and one from Canada — to rural Kentucky this past summer to see what it's like to provide medical care to an underserved population.

## COURIER PROGRAM

Anna Carey left her home near Rochester, New York, in 2003 to take part in Frontier Nursing University's Courier Program — a rural public health learning experience that brings a small group of volunteers to Eastern Kentucky annually — not realizing the experience would be literally life changing.

"I definitely didn't plan on staying originally," said Carey, who ended up relocating permanently to Hyden, in Leslie County, following her time as a Courier. "But I found that there were a lot of opportunities to do things in public health and health education in the area."

Carey — whose active and varied community service work over the past 16 years in Leslie County has helped place nurses and preventative health education programs in schools, established reading tutoring programs for students, facilitated mobile dental clinics, and provided affordable pet spay and neuter services to residents, among other initiatives — looks back on her summer service as a Courier as the launching off point to her public health career.

"The Courier Program is just a great program," Carey said. "It's an experience that really lets you see firsthand the needs and the issues that are going on in rural communities."





*Couriers Pamela Dunn, Lucy Conant and June Donald, who served in the mid-1940s, cross what is likely the Middle Fork Kentucky River near Frontier Nursing Service founder Mary Breckinridge's home in Wendover, in Leslie County.*



*Two Couriers ride on horseback near Wendover.*



*Kate Ireland served as a Courier during the summers of 1951-1954 and again as a part-time Courier from 1959-1960. She later played a number of different roles on the board of the Frontier Nursing Service, which later became Frontier Nursing University.*

## A Long History

In 1928, Frontier Nursing founder Mary Breckinridge established the Courier Program as a means of recruiting young volunteers willing to come to the Eastern Kentucky mountains to deliver medical supplies on horseback to remote clinics, support nurse-midwives during home visits and births, and generally assist in providing health care to rural communities with limited access to providers.

In the nine decades since, the Courier Program has welcomed more than 1,600 participants and evolved over time — the program now follows a summer-based, eight-week model and outreach no longer requires horses — but its mission has remained largely the same. Each year, Couriers are given a chance to see, firsthand, the challenges and rewards of providing health care in underserved areas.

The number of Courier participants varies from year to year, with most years welcoming around 10 attendees. Funding from Breckinridge Capitol Advisors — a Boston-based investment firm whose president, Peter Coffin, also serves as president of the Frontier Nursing University Foundation — has covered the cost of meals and lodging and provided a gas and food stipend for the most recent Courier classes, so that Couriers face limited out-of-pocket expenses during their stay with the program.

Attendees come from across the U.S. and from a range of educational and professional backgrounds — some are still in college, while others have started their careers. Many Couriers are drawn to the program as a way of exploring rural health care in a very tangible, grassroots way.

“A lot of times our Couriers already know they plan on going into a medical field, and they come to us seeking more exposure to public health issues and rural health care specifically,” explained Tara Dykes, the Courier Program coordinator.

Couriers typically live together for the summer at Frontier Nursing University’s Wendover Bed & Breakfast and Retreat Center — site of the original Frontier Nursing Service health care clinic — just a few miles south of the Frontier Nursing University campus in Hyden. During the days, participants shadow and volunteer at clinics and other health care partner sites in the region, including the Red Bird Mission in Beverly and the Little Flower Clinic in Hazard.

“Many of the Couriers come to us new to Kentucky and new to Appalachian culture, but by the time they leave, they’re like family to the people here,” said Ellen Napier, CEO of the Little Flower Clinic, which provides low-cost health care services for citizens who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

While a few Couriers, like Carey, may decide to stay in Appalachia to serve rural populations there, having Couriers relocate to Eastern Kentucky is not necessarily a primary goal of the experience. Rather, organizers hope the program can empower and inspire participants to work in rural health settings wherever they may end up across the country.

“We’re really using Hyden, and Appalachia more broadly, as an example of a rural community,” explained Frontier



*Martha Woodworth, a Courier from Boston, carries saddlebags for a Frontier Nursing Service nurse-midwife in the early 1960s.*

Nursing University's President Susan Stone. "We want participants to be exposed to the types of challenges a typical rural community faces in terms of accessing health care, with the hopes that they can take those insights with them into their future chosen professions."

The Courier Program also seeks to show participants that rural residents want — and deserve — to play an active role in their own health care.

"All too often the traditional model of health care is where the provider has all the power in saying, 'Here's the plan. Here's what you need to do to make your life better,'" said Nancy

Reinhart, a 1998 Courier who later served as the program's coordinator for several years before leaving to pursue her master's degree in midwifery at Frontier Nursing University.

"Looking back on my time as a Courier and my introduction to midwifery through the program, I realized it was my first exposure to a shared-decision making model, where I observed providers working together with their patients to create a health care plan that was realistic and that the clients themselves were actually able to realize and want," Reinhart said.

## Community Partnerships

During the Courier experience, participants are typically matched with one of the program's many community partner sites — made up of an array of community clinics, health departments, and other rural health care providers in Eastern Kentucky and even across the border in Virginia — where they are encouraged to not only shadow and assist staff but also create and launch their own projects to address a specific health care challenge facing rural residents.

This past summer, 2019 Courier Dorn McMahon's project aimed to increase year-round access to affordable, fresh fruits and vegetables — especially for those with dietary restrictions due to diabetes or heart disease — by partnering with the Letcher County Farmer's Market to offer canning classes for residents.

The county's FARMACY program, sponsored by Mountain Comprehensive Health Corporation, lets Letcher County

residents with pre-existing health conditions redeem vouchers for fruits and vegetables at the farmer's market — an initiative that struck McMahon as something worth replicating elsewhere.

"It's a really great model, because it's targeting a high-risk population and supporting the local economy at the same time," said McMahon, a longtime medical social worker from Portland, Maine, who is now pursuing a nursing degree at the University of Maine at Fort Kent.

In hopes of helping extend residents' access to affordable, healthy foods beyond the summer harvest, McMahon presented canning classes for residents in which all the jars and other materials were supplied.

"It's a way of contributing to people's confidence that they can take care of themselves with food in a way that is both joyful and also really practical," he said.





*Couriers from 1967 pose on a rock likely located near The Garden House on the grounds of the Frontier Nursing Service's historical headquarters in Wendover. Current Couriers still stay in the house's second-floor guest rooms.*

At the Little Flower Clinic, past Couriers have helped build community gardens and create diabetic care kits — complete with pill counters, blood pressure cuffs, suggested menus, food scales and more — among many other successful projects, Napier said.

While Couriers aren't allowed to engage in active or direct medical care with individual patients — the program's motto is "Hearts On, Hands Off," Dykes said, since not all Couriers come to the program with medical training — they are able assist with community public health initiatives and to shadow care providers to witness some of the challenges facing rural residents.

Californian Audrey Cameron, a 2019 Courier and current junior at the University of British Columbia, spent time this

past summer helping coordinate Red Bird Mission's annual Tri-County Health and Resource Fair. She also assisted Red Bird's nurse, Angela Hubbard, in leading exercise classes and a hearing screening clinic at a local senior center.

"Through a grant, Red Bird Mission was able to have audiologists come in from all over the country and provide free hearing aids to seniors in the area," Cameron explained. "Getting residents set up with their hearing aids was an incredibly moving experience, even though I really had done nothing other than be the person to call and tell them their hearing aids were in. To hear the gratitude in their voices made me realize how isolating it must be to not be able to hear clearly — and that for people in a rural community, addressing that need can be incredibly challenging."

## Breaking Down Stigmas

Because most Couriers do come from outside Kentucky, some may enter the program with preconceived assumptions about Appalachia and the root causes of residents' lack of ready access to health care, employment and stable housing.

After completing the program, they often view things differently.

"The biggest takeaways our Couriers cite after their time in the program are the ways that it changes their perspective and reinforces their commitment to serving rural populations," Dykes said. "So many arrive with preconceived notions about Southeastern Kentucky due to things they've heard or read or seen on TV, but once they get here, they realize things are quite different [than the stereotypes], and they become a part of our community."

Molly Craig, a college junior from Pennsylvania majoring

in biology with a concentration in public health, signed on for the Courier program in 2018 hoping to gain real world community health experience before attending medical school. The experience, she said, "changed [my] life."

"I think it was one of the most meaningful periods of time I've ever spent working on anything in my life," said Craig, who is now one of the Courier alumni serving on the program's Advisory Council. "It gave me increased knowledge of public health problems — including, particularly, the opioid crisis — and insights into the limited resources to combat them in rural areas. Also, I think there's a lot of stigma about people residing in rural Appalachia. And through the Courier Program, I learned that rural people really shouldn't be stigmatized, because that oversimplifies and overshadows their realities."



*In most years, the Courier Program welcomes about 10 participants. The 2019 Couriers included (front row) Daniel Goold, Eric Lakomek and Dorn McMahon; (second row) Breanna Bowling, Emily Cross, Audrey Cameron, HaLee Morgan, Sarah Baldree and Reilly Hail.*

## *An Ideal Place to Serve*

Participants apply to the Courier Program by submitting an online application and providing a college transcript and up to three letters of reference. On the online form, participants — who must have completed at least two years of college before applying — are asked to describe attributes that would allow them to thrive in a rural setting and to share about a time when they successfully navigated an encounter with someone different from themselves, among other questions.

No annual cap is placed on Courier class size, and Dykes said there is room for the program to grow.

For Jonathan Allotey, a 2015 Courier originally from Ghana who now works in Cleveland as a clinical trial coordinator, the opportunity to become immersed in a rural American community was eye-opening and instrumental in shaping his long-term goal of becoming a rural health physician after he completes medical school.

“The rural patient population [in Kentucky] was so warm and so wonderful,” said Allotey, whose Courier project included creating a bulletin board detailing low- and no-cost regional health resources at the KentuckyOne Health clinic where he volunteered. “It’s almost as if you’re received into their family just for caring for them. I would love to serve in a place with patients like that, where you can see a need, and you can work to address it appropriately.”

Carey, who stumbled into her lifelong calling and a new permanent home thanks to her decision to become a

Courier in 2003, views the Courier Program as an ideal first step for students and others considering a potential career in community health.

“Because it’s such a small population here, people are pretty welcoming to those who want to come in and help,” she said. “If you have that kind of service orientation, there’s really no better place to come and do this work.” ■



*2019 Courier Dorn McMahon helps a woman pick out and try on eyeglass frames at the Remote Area Medical clinic in Wise, Virginia.*

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