

Students speak language of healing in Immokalee

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Speaking Creole is a talent that Harielle Deshommes doesn't call upon often – but in Immokalee, with its sizable Haitian community, her second language was a godsend.

Same for classmate Gabe Lowenhaar, who's fluent in Spanish. The first-year College of Medicine students traveled to Immokalee during spring break for FSU-Cares' annual medical outreach.

Like their fellow med students, they gained valuable experience performing health screenings for Immokalee's underserved migrant community. In addition, though, Deshommes and Lowenhaar served as interpreters. They got a whole new perspective on how health care improves when patient and provider speak the same language.

They loved the challenge – and the flexibility.

"I was doing glucose checks one minute, pricking fingers," Lowenhaar said, "and then running over to check-in, and running over to talk to somebody who didn't speak Spanish to try to interpret for the patient, then running back over to take somebody's blood pressure. It was really fun. Really tiring, but I enjoyed it more than sitting down in one place."

They never had any doubt that they were needed. Deshommes recalled a day when she was asked to help with a patient whose only health problems appeared to be high blood pressure and headaches.

"It was much deeper than that," she said. "Not only was she having headaches and hypertension, but she

couldn't get across that she also had high blood sugar, a failing kidney, and she couldn't walk sometimes because of pain in her feet."

The patient, who spoke little English, had struggled to describe her other conditions. She eventually assumed that the medical team would be able to discern her ailments once they examined her. She didn't know what our medical students are taught: that the patient interview is crucial. So interpreters are invaluable.

"What you tell someone in your language is different from what you tell someone when they don't understand the language," Deshommes said. "Without the interpreters, the physicians overseeing us for that trip – George Rust and Christie Alexander – would not have had the full story. I'm so glad that we were there, because God forbid if, because of a language barrier, they missed a little thing that could have been life-changing."

Alexander noted that it's difficult to find certified medical interpreters – particularly for something like a health fair in a community setting rather than in a clinic or hospital.

"We were so fortunate to have both Gabe and Harielle," she said. "Although they're not trained as medical interpreters, they served multiple roles – understanding the language, the culture and the medicine behind the information we were giving the people that came to our health screenings."

Lowenhaar, who was born in Brazil, said he gained new insights.

"I grew up in Miami – and if you spoke Spanish and Portuguese, you probably could speak with everybody," he said. "This was the first time I had



Medical students Gabe Lowenhaar and Harielle Deshommes put their language translating talents to work in Immokalee. GLENN SANGER-HODGSON/FSU COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

ever really worked with Creole-speakers who didn't speak any English. It was really difficult. I finally felt what it was like to not be able to talk with a patient.

"Some didn't speak Spanish, English or Creole. They spoke their native language from Colombia or Guatemala or Ecuador. I was talking to a little girl, and she didn't understand anything I said. Her dad told me that she only speaks the Mayan dialect. It is nothing like Spanish or Portuguese. He explained to me that where they come from, they learn their language first, before Spanish."

Even knowing the language is no guarantee of smooth communication.

"There's all sorts of cultural things,"

Want to become a medical interpreter?

FSU offers an undergraduate medical Spanish interpreter certificate program, which includes a one-semester practicum in Immokalee. To learn more, visit <https://fla.st/2IPJ0aL> or email instructor Tatiana Fernandez at Tatiana.fernandez@med.fsu.edu.

Lowenhaar said. "You can translate things and they don't make any sense literally – like 'the straw that broke the camel's back.'"

Deshommes learned Creole growing up in South Florida with her Haitian parents. This was her first medical outreach trip, and her first time to act as an interpreter.

Lowenhaar took an outreach trip to Ecuador, but neither had traveled previously to Immokalee.

"I highly recommend going to Immokalee," Lowenhaar said. "I had felt like I was losing my humanism, getting caught up in all my science and trying to pass an exam, and I forgot that the patient on the other side is a person with worries, fears, hopes and dreams. Immokalee helped me revisit that. I would go back again."

So would Deshommes.

"You don't have to leave the country to say that you served the underserved," she said. "Immokalee is in Florida, but you don't feel like you're in Florida at all. Yet you're still making a difference."

"It makes me speechless sometimes to think that, if not for an interpreter, that patient wouldn't have gotten the care she needed. Thank goodness that we were there."