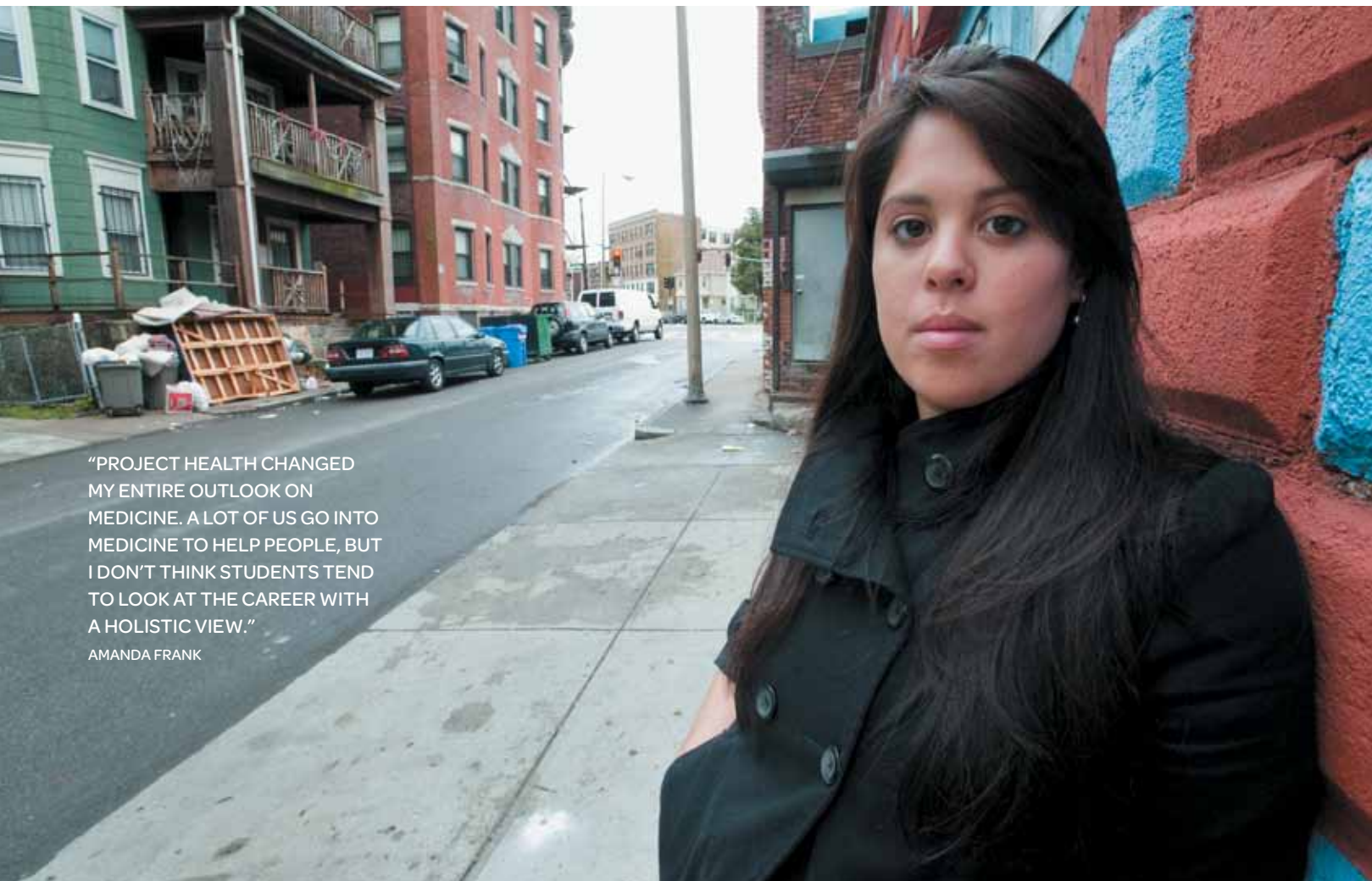


MEDICINE CAN'T DO EVERYTHING. IF A PATIENT DOESN'T HAVE A FIXED HOME OR A GUARANTEED MEAL, A DIFFERENT KIND OF PRESCRIPTION IS IN ORDER. BU UNDERGRADUATE VOLUNTEERS, INCLUDING SARGENT COLLEGE STUDENTS, ARE CONNECTING LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS TO BASIC RESOURCES AND GIVING THEM A FIGHTING CHANCE FOR A HEALTHY LIFE.

By Maggie Bucholt and Andrew Thurston

More than Health Care



"PROJECT HEALTH CHANGED MY ENTIRE OUTLOOK ON MEDICINE. A LOT OF US GO INTO MEDICINE TO HELP PEOPLE, BUT I DON'T THINK STUDENTS TEND TO LOOK AT THE CAREER WITH A HOLISTIC VIEW."

AMANDA FRANK

Amanda Frank in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood.

Amanda Frank ('10) had volunteered to do a little patient outreach, but she couldn't help reaching a little further. When families came into the BU-affiliated Boston Medical Center (BMC) for treatment, Frank was asked to step in to see if they needed help with anything else—heating bills, food stamps, child care. Her first patient needed them all. And work. Frank decided to let the patient take her part-time job.

"She was in dire need of help," says Frank. "She was living on less than \$100 a month. I was also a home health aid and my employer was always looking for more help; I was going home for the holiday and I thought, 'Well, let her take my job.'"

Frank is a volunteer with Project Health, a national outreach program that places undergraduates in inner-city health clinics to help patients access essential resources, such as housing or utility bill assistance.

Their work allows medical teams and social workers to focus on more complex issues like substance abuse, mental health, and domestic abuse, although environmental factors are no less important to good health. "You can't prescribe antibiotics for an ear infection and expect good results if the family is living in a car," says Sutton Kiplinger, executive director of Project Health, Boston. "Medicine can only do so much."

Today, approximately 25 Boston University undergraduates volunteer with Project Health a minimum of six hours a week. In the spring 2009 semester, there were 75 applications from Boston University students for just 10 open Project Health volunteer slots.

"The student interest at BU has been incredible," says Kiplinger. "We've been able to get a strong volunteer corps specifically positioned for the patient population."

Such interest encouraged Project Health to expand its presence in Boston in 2008; Frank was chosen to run a second patient outreach program at the Upham's Corner Health Center in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood. She now leads a team of eight multilingual volunteer undergraduates (Frank herself speaks Spanish and "a few Chinese dialects," she adds).

"It's a very intimate setting for volunteers to get in contact with their clients," says Frank. "Upham's Corner is overwhelmed with the number of clients they have and we're there to relieve them to some extent."

In the current difficult economy, demand for Project Health's services is rising. Since January 2009, the number of families served has remained the same, but each family is facing three or four issues instead of one or two, says Kiplinger.

Frank adds that despite the rising tide of problems, the volunteers aren't interested in handing out short-term fixes: "A big part of Project Health is to empower people to lift themselves out of the devastation they're in and to tell them, 'We didn't fix your problems; we helped *you* fix your problems.'"

The fall 2008 addition of a follow-up office at BU Sargent College where students can make private calls to patients, as well as state and community agencies, has helped volunteers foster long-term relationships with their clients.

"In the beginning, I had one client who said, 'Are you just going to take my number and never call me again?'" remem-



Undergraduates in the Project Health office at BU Sargent College.

bers Frank. "I think when they see our dedication to the program and to them, they get more motivated."

Students also use the on-campus space to unwind. Mandatory reflection sessions give volunteers a chance to discuss their cases and put issues in perspective. For Sarah Hodge ('12), a volunteer at the BMC site, a Sargent office reflection session was instrumental in helping her reconcile her disappointment and worry about a client whose phone was disconnected and who was not responding to letters. On the upside, Hodge related a positive experience dealing with a young father whom she had helped register for General Educational Development (GED) classes at Roxbury Community College, Massachusetts; he subsequently passed the first of five GED test sections.

The patients aren't the only ones enjoying life-changing benefits, according to Jean Peteet, clinical assistant professor at BU Sargent College: "Project Health gives students real-life experiences," she says. "They understand what it's like for someone who has MassHealth insurance to access services, and they gain communication skills with people of many different ethnic backgrounds."

As she prepares for a career as a nurse practitioner, Frank says her work with Project Health has completely reshaped her perspective. "Project Health changed my entire outlook on medicine," says Frank. "A lot of us go into medicine to help people, but I don't think students tend to look at the career with a holistic view."

"A lot of us think of it as, 'OK, someone's sick and I'll help them get better,' but I can honestly say I never really thought of the other factors that go into health care and maintaining a healthy lifestyle."

Changing Lives

Over a five-month period in 2008, Project Health volunteers at Boston Medical Center helped:

205 families secure housing, including Section 8 and market-rate units, as well as shelters;

154 clients enroll children in day care, after-school, and Head Start programs;

135 clients access food stamps, food pantries, dollar-a-bag programs, or farmers' markets.



WEB Extra

Read more about Project Health at BU at www.bu.edu/sargent/project-health.