

# Faculty *focus*

*Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint*

## ***Empowerment, not Charity:*** **An Exercise in Sustainable Aid and Global Citizenship**

by Sarah Mitchell

There is charity, and then, there is empowerment. When Michele Lambaria, Assistant Professor of Physical Therapy, planned her scouting trip to Cambodia in partnership with her colleague Maureen Tippen, Clinical Assistant Professor of Nursing, her goal was to gather information to see if she and her students could be of service in the future. The two planned to develop the inter-professional education (IPE) international service learning (ISL) course in which physical therapy and nursing join forces to take students to other countries to work with and for locals. With the aid of a grant from the Thompson Center for Learning & Teaching (TCLT), Lambaria arrived in Cambodia last May with Tippen and her nursing students. The pair spent two weeks talking with community members in a variety of contexts— schools, hospitals, and homes, such as the Brothers of Charity, a home for boys and men with disabilities— dividing their time between the areas in and around Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Rather than relying solely on their own thoughts and observations, they “wanted to see what the locals see as the needs,” so that they could best serve the people and “approach . . . with humility,” recognizing that they weren’t the only ones with insight and something to give.

From Lambaria’s perspective—likely honed in while completing a similar project in Honduras—and, undoubtedly, Tippen’s too, helping doesn’t

mean going to those perceived as less fortunate, aiding them, and leaving them much the same way. In a word, helping doesn’t mean charity. Genuinely helping people, Lambaria would argue, means teaching oneself out of a job, in this case, providing locals with the skillset “to do it themselves over time.” Helping means empowerment. And empowerment is what Cambodians need and want.

Lambaria’s visit to the country confirmed for her what Tippen already felt. Physical therapy “absolutely is needed” in the country. Currently, Cambodians suffer from a pervasive lack of basic health care resources, explainable in part by the country’s traumatic history. These truths resonated with her from day one.

“Perhaps the most defining moment was the first day of our trip when we visited the Killing Fields and S21 in Phnom Penh, two of the main sites of the execution and torture of innocent men, women and children in the 1970s. Entire families were slaughtered in this unthinkable genocide. The Khmer Rouge regime specifically targeted all who were educated and their family members. Thus, physicians, nurses, physical therapists, attorneys, teachers, etc., were killed simply because they were educated, and the dictator at the time, Pol Pot, wanted complete supremacy. Other people were forced into rice farming, and many people were starved over time. The

country's infrastructure has not recovered, thus resulting in the unmet needs and lack of access to health care resources today.”

With the needs in Cambodia easily and quickly confirmed and identified, Lambaria and Tippen, each with her own set of students, intend to embark on this joint service learning venture in 2018, as well as look further into the future with the hope that nursing eventually will join the established physical therapy project in Honduras. In all service learning projects, Lambaria and Tippen carry with them the ideals of sustainability and mutual enrichment between UM-Flint instructors and students and the communities they're impacting.

Though the current programs, as well as the new joint venture, are designed as professional development for UM-Flint physical therapy and nursing students, they intentionally go beyond simply having students practice their soon-to-be professions internationally, and foster global citizenship, goodwill, and service. As Lambaria passionately emphasized, “We learn a lot from the people who live it every day ... It's humbling; It's powerful.”



Photo taken during Lambaria's and Tippen's trip to Cambodia illustrating the community's need for education and assistance. This is a photo of a school.

Quotes from student participants from the 2015 trip to Honduras:

*"I think the greatest clinical knowledge or skill that I gained from this experience was being able to look at the bigger picture. In this environment we were forced to look at a person's condition and our resources and to figure out what we could do for someone. For me, that helped to simplify the approach to treatment and I think that same approach could be used here. I think learning to do this and practicing it with treatment will really help me on my clinical. I hope to be able to apply the same sort of mentality."*

*"I definitely gained some knowledge and skill in pediatric therapy. I will be able to use this in a very current context as we continue through our pediatric curriculum, but also in a long term context. I don't plan to go specifically into pediatric therapy, but I am certain that at some point in my career, I will need to treat a child. This trip also helped me to understand disability in the context of a different culture. It was difficult to know that some of the kids we treated in Roatán would be living a completely different life if they had access to the care and resources available in other countries. It has helped me to understand the importance of advocating for kids by knowing how much even simple things can impact their entire life."*

*"I learned that no matter how much I feel I am serving people, they are giving me so much more. I cannot put words to what exactly they are giving me, but it is something that I want to experience more often. When I graduate from PT school I want to take my physical therapy skills on missions and make serving people in America and in other countries my life's work."*

Written by **Sarah Mitchell**

Sarah serves as the Graduate Research Assistant for the TCLT. She can also be found tutoring at the Marian E. Wright Writing Center and discussing English—her chosen major—in class a couple of nights a week.