

Acceptance speech given by Sarah Shannon, Executive Director, Hesperian Health Guides
The Ruth Roemer Social Justice Leader Award
April 8, 2015

I want to thank the UCLA School of Public Health Alumni Association for this wonderful recognition, and Davida Coady for her moving words.

It is meaningful to receive this award from Davida today given that she and I first met in the halls of UCLA and that that meeting in 1981 ended up being one of the key events that propelled me into the public health work I have done since. First to the Venice Family Clinic, and then a few months later Davida sent me on my way to work in refugee camps in Honduras with people who had fled across the border from El Salvador seeking safety from the horrors of a civil war and the destruction of their villages. As I was leaving she handed me a copy of Hesperian's book *Where There Is No Doctor*. I leaned heavily on *Where There is No Doctor* as I found myself setting up water, sanitation, and emergency nutrition centers – training community members to be health promoters who would then help their neighbors, and trying to find creative and fun ways to share health information, and to organize communities around health concerns.

In the process I became a convert for life to the idea that accessible, practical information can enable people to act – to improve not just their own health, but to become motivated to address the conditions that are the underlying cause of poor health and health problems.

I am deeply honored to receive the Ruth Roemer award. One aspect of Ruth's amazing career that resonates for me was her insistence on a broad view of public health; her determination to work across disciplines and to do so in a way that addresses the underlying social and economic conditions that create poor health. This is, frankly, why I do public health and I suspect the same is true for many of you.

My experience is that people, especially those who are marginalized, actually see those connections quite clearly – it is part of their lived experience. And we can learn a lot from them.

Health Actions for Women, is a brand new book I'm proud to have written based on the experiences of community organizers around the world who shared activities and strategies that were then field tested and tried out by over 1400 women, men, boys and girls. For example, we included an activity that can be used by a group to look at how status and differences due to gender, race, age, income, ability and education, influence power within a community and also health – these are hard issues to deal with. That activity was contributed by a group of garment workers from South Africa, but I tried it out here in Los Angeles with a group of community college students. And most importantly, those same garment workers and others contributed their ideas about how to take that intersectional analysis and use it to work to build solidarity around actions that can be taken to improve everyone's health. *Health Actions for women* is filled with activities like this – practical ideas for addressing challenging issues like gender-based violence, and inequitable pay for women, as well as promoting safer pregnancies, and health services that respond to the needs of women and girls. That book, and Hesperian's other work, is filled

with the wisdom of community organizers and health promoters – and meant to be shared across borders and cultures.

When I started my journey in public health over 30 years ago, we talked about something called International Health. Now, it is clear that this boundary no longer exists. Migration, climate change, urbanization – mean that the epidemic of diabetes we struggle with in California is shared by our partners in the Philippines, Zambia, and Honduras. Or that a disease like Chikungunya moved from India to the Caribbean and is now rampant in Central America and growing in the US. Another example of this is an epidemic of another sort -- the political backlash against women's health and reproductive rights – occurring right now in Latin America and other parts of the world. We are not immune from this in the US where women's access to family planning and if they need and choose it, access to a safe abortion, is under attack.

A few years ago Hesperian began making all our health information available for free online in English and Spanish, and it is getting a huge amount of traffic, with 700,000 people reading and using that information alone this past month. That includes a wide range of information on many topics – but we've been astounded that month after month the topic most heavily accessed and read is the information related to safe abortion –this is particularly true for those coming to the site from Mexico and Latin America, but we also have a high number of readers accessing that information from Texas. I'm proud that we are providing access to critical information, and we are certainly committed to continue to do so.

But the challenge we all face is how do we fight back and not only protect, but advance, these hard won rights. Human rights. Not only to ensure access to family planning and safe abortion in California, but also in Texas and Indiana, the entire US, AND to protect those rights from being undermined everywhere. And how will we ensure that these rights go hand in hand with the right to access health care that everyone must enjoy?

I think we know the answer. Public health is people's health. Doing public health means working with people. It means community organizing, it means getting politically active, and it often means working under challenging circumstances without enough resources.

When we organize against the marketing of junk food in schools in California, we are helping to lead an effort that will cross borders and inspire others. When we call for a ban on fracking, we are joining in a much larger struggle for people's health against a powerful global industry. And when we protect our food from chemicals like the pesticides in Round Up, found by the European Union to be carcinogenic, that poison the land and make us sick – we are also helping to make food safer and healthier elsewhere. And when we in California provide health care to everyone, regardless of their immigration status, we are setting an example for others to follow. This is public health at its best – in the broad way that Ruth Roemer exemplified.

I am grateful to Ruth Roemer for her trailblazing, and thank you for all of the work that you do to make the right to health a reality. And I'm deeply honored to receive the Ruth Roemer award today. Thank you.