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Mentor, Mentee *Alumni and students forge fruitful alliances*

When Massachusetts General Hospital anesthesiologist Lena Dohlman, MPH '93, volunteered to mentor incoming students at the School, she saw Halloween as the chance to introduce her mentees to that peculiarly American ritual known as "trick or treat." Accompanied by her young daughter, who chose punk-rocker couture for the occasion, Dohlman took physicians Freeman Changamire, 27, and Dharam Kumbhani, 25, around her Brookline neighborhood.



As Dohlman pointed out Superman, the Power Puff girls, Harry Potter, and other icons of pop culture, she got a taste of what she would later describe as mentoring's "two-way-street" of rewards. Changamire, a Zimbabwean, told her about Halloween's roots in an ancient Celtic pagan ritual held to mark the fall harvest and honor the dead. And Kumbhani described Diwali, a national religious holiday in India. During that celebration, he said, families light their homes with hundreds of tiny lanterns and carry sweets to friends and loved ones, door to door.

That same night, the Swedish-born Dohlman and her husband, orthopedic surgeon Toby Gerhart, MD, welcomed the two HSPH newcomers to their table, along with other mentees and colleagues from Palestine, Vietnam, and Nigeria. For Changamire, this first of many dinners with Dohlman was "the best thing that happened to me all year." It was the kind of exhilarating cultural and intellectual exchange that makes HSPH mentorships enriching for those who take part.

Transferring wisdom

As alumni like Dohlman know, mentors can be invaluable to students, serving as cultural ambassadors, career advisors, networking facilitators, and role models. The response to the School's [Alumni Mentoring Program](#) since its launch in 2002 has been enthusiastic, says Margaret Loret, director of [Alumni Programs](#). "We have 140 alums signed up, plus students from 12 countries and the U.S.," she reports. "We're planning soon to involve alums from Harvard's other graduate schools, so that our students can tap their expertise as well."

Alumni are asked to give at least two hours a month. In turn, Loret says, "They get the

satisfaction of transferring their wisdom to a new generation, and of knowing they're needed by the School. They also have the simple pleasure of interacting with young people."

Mentors supplement the guidance students already get from their faculty advisors and the Student Services staff, which includes career counselors, financial aid officers, a student-activities advisor, and a social worker. Mentors offer students help in navigating the Harvard labyrinth, a leg up on developing a network of supportive colleagues, and advice in career and personal matters. Students, on the other hand, might learn to juggle priorities, or discover what life is really like in a particular specialty. International students gain insight into American culture, institutions, and ways of practicing public health.

Benefits concrete AND intangible

For Dohlman, who works with underserved patients through Cambridge Health Alliance and Health Volunteers Overseas, a group that trains clinicians in developing countries, mentoring international students is particularly rewarding. Matched with several by Loret's office, she has become especially close to Changamire and Kumbhani.

"I've always had an interest in people from other cultures, and I've learned a lot from student mentees," she says. They've heightened her sensitivity to patients who are reluctant to bare even their arms, for example, or who are terrified by the litany of potential side effects disclosed through the U.S. process of informed consent.

Her mentees say she's empowering. "I can't imagine a better mentor," says Changamire, who will finish his PhD in 2007. Ultimately, he aims to influence policy as a member of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Health. "I've learned a lot just by observing how Lena deals with people. I can talk with her about anything and everything--social issues, school, career paths, what it's like to be a doctor and have a family." Down the road, he adds, he'll look to her for tips when he applies for a residency at top-flight academic medical centers.

As for Kumbhani, who earned an M.S. in epidemiology in 2003, Dohlman advised him last fall on his statement of purpose for U.S. residency applications. She also made phone calls on his behalf. "She really put her credentials on the line," he stresses. After completing a research fellowship at Boston's Veterans Administration and Brigham and Women's hospitals, Kumbhani was matched to a residency at the Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania. He will study internal medicine there before returning to India to do clinical research in chronic disease.

The most important thing Dohlman gave him was intangible, however. "The biggest challenge has been dealing with things on my own in every sense, emotionally, financially, personally," Kumbhani says. "When I met Lena I had been interviewing all over the country for residencies, and she emailed me. She noticed I was really down. It takes seven months to get matched to a hospital, and you have to jump through lots of hoops, especially as a foreign student. She wrote saying she knew I was a good student and would do well in the long run. It really boosted my morale."

Dohlman "has gone out of her way to answer any questions about the culture or school," Kumbhani says. She's been a social conduit as well. He and Freeman have become good friends, he says, "and whenever Lena has us to her house, we meet interesting people from all over the world."

Paying it forward

Dohlman came to mentoring partly out of gratitude toward her own mentor, the esteemed Harvard anesthesiology professor John Hedley-Whyte. She also remembers how enriching it was for her and her husband when, during fellowships at the Kantospital in Basel, Switzerland, in

1982, the family of the physician with whom they were staying gave them an inside view of Swiss society, which they had found "rather closed." At an annual festival called Fasnacht--a little like Mardi Gras, a little like Carnival--the visiting American couple awoke at 4 a.m. to see costumed revelers parade through the streets, carrying enormous canvas lanterns and playing piccolos and drums. That night they sampled flour soup, onion quiche, and other native dishes.

Bringing this story full circle, Changamire has volunteered to mentor Zimbabwean high school students who come through an embassy program to U.S. colleges. "I've always been like a mentor to people," says this only son among six sisters.

"When I came here, I decided I should formalize that. After meeting a physician like Lena from MGH, after seeing what she has achieved in life, for me to be able to sit down with her and talk is humbling. I want to continue to help younger people, and people who are not so fortunate. I want to make the biggest difference I can."

The HSPH Alumni Mentoring Program welcomes new participants. For information, visit <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/alumni> or contact director Margaret Loret at mloret@hsph.harvard.edu.

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