

I remember the first time I told someone that I decided to pursue a career in public health. I had just returned home from my first semester in college and was attending one of my dad's work parties. I forget whom I was speaking to, but his response has stayed with me ever since. As I told him about my decision to major in Public Health Studies, he returned my eager, ear-to-ear smile with questioning, even hesitant, eyes. "What exactly *is* public health?" he said. I thought to myself: What? What do you mean, "What exactly *is* public health?" It's public health! It's, it's—and I was at a loss for words. I just stood there, thinking about everything I had learned in my Introduction to Public Health class—ranging from disaster preparedness to outbreak investigations to the Affordable Care Act—and had no idea how to sum up the entirety of what public health *is* in just a few sentences.

I should have told him, however, that public health *is* everything around you. It is the seatbelts in your car. It is the fluoridated water you drink, or the sanitary food you eat. It is the earthquake drill you learned in school. It is even the air you breathe, free of harmful pollutants and toxins—and it is so much more. Public health critically affects our lives on a daily basis by allowing us to focus on pursuits beyond our own health and wellbeing. In the United States, mothers don't worry about giving birth to children with neural tube defects, children don't even know what chicken pox or diphtheria are, and the average person doesn't even think that the meal they eat for lunch would give them food poisoning. By eliminating the need to worry about our basic welfare, public health has allowed us to increase our economic output, create stable families, and pursue our personal interests. However, while public health makes us, as a whole, better and healthier, it does not necessarily make us more aware about the very things it is protecting us against.

Because public health interventions have eliminated the need to worry about certain things, we sometimes forget about them. This is not good—especially because we see it happening more and more frequently. In 2014, the measles rate in California was 26 per 100,000 people. The last time it was this high was in 1958—1958!—we hadn't even been to the moon yet! This is just one example that highlights a continuing need for public health not only in the United States, but also around the world. If I could tell the public one thing, I would tell them to *be* a public health professional. No, you don't have to go to school for however many years and obtain a degree, but what you can do is take advantage of the resources that have been given to you. Vaccinate your children. Wear your seatbelt. Use a condom. But most importantly, stay informed, be aware, and help us—the current and future public health professionals in this room—help others. There are many countries, and even certain areas of the US, that are not equipped with the same resources that we have living here in Los Angeles, affiliated with one of the best universities in the world.

A mother in Somalia gives birth to her 9th child in 11 years because she doesn't have access to family planning services. A teenager in urban Baltimore gets HIV because she doesn't know how to properly use a condom. A child in rural Cambodia gets ill because he doesn't have access to potable water. This shouldn't happen, and the best part is that it doesn't have to. With the help of the public, we can improve public health locally, nationally, and globally (what a novel idea!). We cannot remain ignorant to the potential threats to public health simply because they do not immediately affect us. Do your part with two easy steps. The first one is easy: Think. Think about public health—think about how it impacts your life on a daily basis or how it has allowed you to pursue your own career or hobbies. The second step is more challenging: Act. Make the right choices. Take advantage of what is there and create a world for yourself and others where preventable injuries and diseases are nonexistent—be your own public health professional.