

student profiles

For Former Pro Soccer Player, Future Kicks Will Promote Health Among African Girls

WHEN SHE WAS 15, **MYRALYN "MIMI" NARTEY** ventured far from her family's home in Arizona to the Republic of Ghana, where her father had been raised, to play professional soccer for the Ghanaian women's national team. While there, she contracted malaria. At first the team administrators and medical staff failed to appreciate the magnitude of her illness. When Nartey began to deteriorate, she was taken to the nearest hospital, which she barely recognized as a medical care facility. "It felt more like an open-air marketplace," she recalls. As she waited a seemingly interminable period to be seen, Nartey saw frightened-looking women with sick babies on their backs. "They had no idea what was going on, or if they were going to be able to pay for what they needed," she says.

The experience made a huge impression. "Here I was, born and raised in the United States with all the resources anyone could have, and commissioned by Ghana to play a sport – yet, I was having problems getting access to health care when I was sick," Nartey says. "It struck me that if I was having a hard time, what about everyone else in this country that was so impoverished?"

With that in mind, Nartey majored in environmental biology as an undergraduate at Columbia University and went on to do a fellowship in which she conducted research to develop anti-malarial drugs. Ultimately she shifted her focus to policy. She got an M.A. in Climate and Society at Columbia, then came to UCLA, where she is pursuing an M.A. in African Studies and a Ph.D. at the

School of Public Health as part of a dual-degree program. Since arriving in 2006, Nartey has channeled the energy she once used on the soccer field into a myriad of activities: In addition to her studies, she serves as an appointee on the Student Health Advisory Committee and is the SPH Diversity Coordination Team co-chair, as well as co-chair of Students of Color for Public Health. She also has a daughter, born in February 2009.

Nartey continues to be interested in malaria – it is an important focus of an undergraduate seminar she has taught the last three years on the dynamics of climate and health in sub-Saharan Africa. But her goals have evolved. After recovering from her bout with malaria, Nartey went on to a fruitful career in professional soccer, representing Ghana in the 2002 FIFA African Cup of Nations and 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup. Now she has her sights set on developing Africa-based programs to promote participation in sports as a way of achieving better health outcomes. "The benefits of sports participation for young women are well documented in the United States, including delayed sexual initiation, better ability to negotiate condom use with partners, and reduced risk of gender-related violence and gender-related medical problems," Nartey notes.

Reflecting on her own soccer experience, Nartey remembers the benefits accrued by her teammates, many of whom were uneducated. "They became much more confident," she says. "It made me realize that promoting sports participation in developing countries of Africa – and especially soccer, which is so woven into the cultural fabric – could be a great strategy for catalyzing some of the health outcomes we want for young women."



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— Myralyn "Mimi" Nartey