

The road twists and turns. There is a comforting freshness to the mountain air. A deer runs across the dimly lit field as the sun begins to rise. This was not an uncommon visual experience growing up in Southwest Virginia and one I often reflect on. I was born and raised in the New River Valley. My childhood experience was laden with outdoor adventures, days spent out on the lake, and s'mores made over the countless campfires. I was afforded this experience from my parents' desire to live in a rural area that was familiar to them. My parents are from the New River Valley and fell in love with living in the Appalachian Mountains, so they could not think of any reason to move to an urban community. The benefits extend beyond the beautiful scenery to the security provided by my neighborhood, the peacefulness of living in privacy, and kindness from a close-knit community of neighbors. I have described a picturesque area but living in rural regions is not without compromises.

The trade-offs were inaccessibility to competitive public schools and extracurricular activities as well as long distances to grocery stores and hospitals. However, it was a commonality that my brothers and I grew up without ever asking our parents, "Why do we live 30 minutes by car from the nearest urban town?". This question began to bother me when I began my undergraduate program and met peers from other areas like Roanoke, Washington D.C., and New York. I started to realize that there were many differences in the community I was raised in versus more accessible ones my friends were raised in. As I began my first semester at Virginia Tech four years ago, my desire to understand these inadequacies in my own community and how I could increase access to beneficial health-related and educational resources in rural communities grew within me.

Throughout my undergraduate career I took advantage of many experiences outside of the traditional academic realm that afforded me the opportunity to learn about the New River Valley in ways that I had not been able to do before. I led and participated in service learning projects centered around domestic violence issues, food insecurity, and environmental sustainability. As I worked within my community on these diverse service learning projects, I was inspired by the selfless community partners that worked for these non-profits as a career. I helped load several truckloads of furniture and food that were delivered to individuals relocating from domestic violent households, packed boxes of food to be distributed throughout the New River Valley, gathered produce from community farms to be distributed to people that live in food deserts, and restored infrastructure along the Blue Ridge Parkway and Appalachian Trail. Every community partner that I have met along my journey has taught me how to work within and better my rural community. The experience of working within one's community on

different service learning projects has really showed me that each person in a community matters and can contribute to the betterment of it.

After graduating this past May with a Bachelor of Science in neuroscience and psychology, I fortunately was accepted into a doctorate program in translational biology, medicine, and health. This first year of my graduate school experience will be spent rotating with different investigators working on various public health related research projects. My first rotation was with Dr. Julia Gohlke, Associate Professor of Environmental Health in the Department of Population Health Sciences at the Virginia Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine. I focused on examining differences in infant mortality rates in rural communities versus urban communities in Virginia. This was done by using U.S. census tracts to categorize communities based off characterizations such as, population density, urbanization, and daily commuting. This project was exciting to work on because I worked with data associated with communities I am familiar with. Ultimately, this will contribute to Dr. Gohlke's continued efforts in determining a correlation between proximity to surface mines and rural community health deficits. My current rotation is with Dr. Sarah Parker, who holds many titles as a Research Assistant Professor at the Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute. The research project I am working on with her involves examining the Health Information National Trends Survey by the National Cancer Institute to investigate community members access to appropriate treatment clinics for cancer within rural communities versus urban communities.

I am excited to attend the 2018 Virginia Rural Health Collaborators Conference. I anticipate this experience will provide me with a more in-depth understanding of issues rural residents like myself face as well as expose me to emerging issues that I am unaware of that affect my home state. This conference also provides me with the chance to meet like-minded professionals that seek to better understand the disparities faced in rural communities and to strengthen my network of colleagues. Much like the experiences beyond the classroom that I sought out during my undergraduate years, I know that these experiences of going to conferences, networking, and engaging in critical discussions will show me what careers are possible and what will best fit with my interests. After my first year of graduate school, I will have chosen a mentor within a public health related field of research to continue my efforts in understanding and improving the health of rural residents.