

Striving for a fair start



Through the Tuscaloosa Pre-K Partnership, UA students deliver an array of academic and medical services to preschoolers and their families.

BY OLIVIA GRIDER | PHOTOS BY MIRANDA BARRETT, KELSEY DAUGHERTY AND MADALYNN YOUNG

The privilege of teaching a 4-year-old named Gary to write his name was not lost on Annie Wyatt, a University of Alabama freshman majoring in social work. “We would write it together until he could write it correctly on his own,” Wyatt recalls. “It made me feel so special being a part of that.”

During Fall 2015, Wyatt spent three hours in a preschool classroom each week as part of a social work course and the UA/Tuscaloosa Pre-Kindergarten Partnership, a nationally unique collaboration between the University and Tuscaloosa City Schools that works to identify academically at-risk 4-year-olds and provide them and their families with health and education services. The goal of the nine-month, full-day pre-K program, which spans 22 classrooms at nine schools, is for these children to enter kindergarten healthy and ready to learn.

“All children want is to be loved and appreciated,” Wyatt says her experience taught her. “They want to know that someone out there thinks they are important. Sometimes we are so focused on ourselves and our own problems we hardly notice the people struggling or less fortunate than we are. When I worked there, my own problems and worries seemed to disappear. I felt like I was making a difference, and it gave me a purpose.”

In addition to social-work students, those studying education, music, human development, medicine and nursing participate in the pre-K partnership. During the 2015-16 academic year, 27 UA students volunteered in classrooms as academic assistants. Several UA service-learning classes, including SPE 100 Exceptional Lives in Society, NEW 237 Cooperation and Conflict, SW 100 Introduction to Social Work and NUR 422 Community

Health Nursing, partnered with the Tuscaloosa Pre-K Initiative. UA also dedicated 13 federal work-study awards to students who committed to serving a minimum of 10 hours per week in pre-K classrooms during the 2015-2016 school year, bringing the total number of awards to 72 since 2008. The initiative offers broad health services through partnerships with UA’s medical school, Family Medicine Residency Program, Speech and Hearing Center and Capstone College of Nursing.

Because many kids in the program have not had access to consistent health care, UA students offer health screenings to its approximately 390 children each year.

Nursing students enrolled in NUR 422 Community Health Nursing and medical students provide free physical examinations, and UA and Shelton State Community College nursing students take vital signs and screen children for anemia and levels of cholesterol, lead and glucose in their blood. Capstone College of Nursing students also teach mini-lessons on healthy eating as part of their community health rotation.

Darci Anderson, a senior majoring in nursing, says one little boy ran up to her station, sat in a chair and chatted happily until she explained she needed to prick his finger. Then he became scared and cried. “This may seem minor, but the significance was great because it was apparent he did not have experience going to the doctor for his annual check-ups,” Anderson says. “If it had not been for the pre-K screening, he probably would not have received the testing.”

Medical students assist with health screenings as part of their pediatrics clinical rotation, and a resident physician from the Tuscaloosa Family Medicine Resident Program attends each screening to check any abnormal health findings and make recommendations for follow-up care.

After each screening, the Tuscaloosa City Schools district sends letters to parents with information about their children’s health and referrals to physicians, dentists and social workers, as needed. “These screenings help us to not only gain data for the overall health of the community, but they also help on a much more personal level to detect signs of early health issues in each child,” says Emma-Caitlin Pitts, a senior majoring in nursing. “It’s definitely a win-win.”

Other health services provided through the UA partner-

UA students assist teachers in Tuscaloosa’s 22 pre-K classrooms. Medical screenings include basic exams, blood tests and hearing screenings.



ship include hearing screenings and FocusFirst high-tech vision screenings sponsored by the Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility (see article on page 8). Students have screened more than 1,900 pre-K children for vision problems since the program began. Impairments are typically detected in 11 percent of children, all of whom receive free follow-up care.

Pitts says she learned through NUR 422 that the health-care system in America is trying to make a shift toward health promotion and prevention rather than waiting until an individual or community is sick.

Dr. Paige Johnson, assistant professor of nursing and co-instructor of NUR 422 along with Dr. Michele Montgomery, says helping with pre-K screenings can have a far-reaching impact on future health-care providers. “It is my hope that they will see the health disparities and issues that are prevalent just around the corner from our University,” Johnson says. “I hope that they will understand the importance of primary prevention, health education and health promotion.”

Anderson says she learned why the need for screenings and teaching, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, is so strong. “The truth of the matter is not everyone has the same health knowledge or access to care, and this will be important for me to remember as I go on to my career,” she says.

Education and human development majors and other students also gain real-world experiences to use in their professions. Students assist teachers with daily activities in the pre-K program’s classrooms. UA School of Music and music-education students regularly visit pre-K classrooms to provide introductory musical instruction, and students with the UA Speech and Hearing Center provide speech therapy to children in the program.

Wyatt says she wants to become a therapist, but as long as she’s making a positive difference in others’ lives, she’ll be happy. “Volunteering here reinforced my desire to help others in any way I could and showed me that the major I have picked is the right one for me,” she says.

For more information about the UA/Tuscaloosa Pre-K Partnership, contact Lindsey Thomas at lmthomas@ua.edu or 205-348-6491.

