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Public Health Leaders: Anne Thomas

Dare County health director “identifies the win-win and works to that end”

Anne Thomas

As director of Dare County Department of Public Health since 1996, Anne Thomas has been making change happen in her organization and community for over a decade.

Those changes have been fundamental (transforming the perception of public health in her community), instrumental (improving the culture in the health department itself), and revolutionary (working with a range of partners to implement program after program to improve health).

A major challenge for Thomas has been the overdoses and other substance abuse concerns that have plagued Dare County recently. In 2006, at a community meeting about the issue attended by then N.C. Secretary of Health and Human Services Carmen Hooker-Odom, State Senate President Marc Basnight, and Dare County human service agency directors, school administrators, and business and religious leaders, Thomas galvanized the community’s resolve to address the problem and was tapped to lead development of a substance abuse plan for the county.

She began by convening partners from state and local public health communities to develop a vision for the plan. Under her guidance, they assessed the need and detailed the necessary resources, timeline, cost of implementation, and funding sources for a substance abuse continuum-of-care demonstration project in the county. It worked. Based on this work, the state and county allocated $1.4 million for a prevention, professional development and treatment services program which began in January 2007. Always looking to learn more, Thomas is a graduate of the School’s Management Academy for Public Health and Southeast

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— BY ANNE MENKENS

Public Health Leadership Institute. (See page 13)

Ellie Ward, nursing director for Dare County’s Department of Public Health, explains Thomas’ inspirational nature. “Anne sees where we are and where we need to go, and she gets us there,” Ward says. “With partners, even competitors or those with reputations for being closed and unwelcoming, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identifies the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identified the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identified the win-win and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard, welcomed, she identif

Let’s change the question:
What are your dreams?

It’s an age-old curiosity: One person born into poverty falls prey to his circumstances; another becomes a success and inspires. What causes a life to follow one path or another?

Fiorella Horna-Guerra would answer, Work, hope and a miracle or two.

Currently serving as consultant to the North Carolina Farmworker Health Program in the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Rural Health and Community Care, Horna-Guerra knows first-hand about her clients’ circumstances. When she was five years old, her family moved from Lima, Peru, to New York City in search of a new beginning. Two months later, her father returned to Peru, with no explanation, leaving behind his wife and young daughter in a country where they knew little about the language and customs.

Horna-Guerra’s mother, whose most marketable job skill was sewing, grew up in an era when women in Peru were not encouraged to go to school. Still, says Horna-Guerra, her mother’s faith, love for learning, work ethic, independence and resilience allowed them to live a productive and secure life.

Horna-Guerra has spent her adult life giving back. A 2006 graduate of Carolina’s Emerging Leaders in Public Health Program, a program of the North Carolina Institute for Public Health (see page 7), Horna-Guerra says that early in her career as community outreach coordinator in a Medicaid managed care plan for Metropolitan Hospital in New York and through her work at the Manhattan Borough President’s office, she often found herself influencing legislation and advocating for expanded funding for health-based programs.

In 1993, when she moved to Cary, N.C., she was hired as program manager for the Community-based Public Health Initiative at the Lee County Health Department in Sanford, N.C.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” is the question she remembers hearing most often. Her colleagues wondered if a feisty, 5-foot-1-inch Latina could work with the primarily African American population they served. People she tried to help thought she talked too fast and had “big-city” ways.

Horna-Guerra says she had to learn to be an advocate and educator as well as a mover and shaker. “I served as a resource to people as they empowered themselves to look for the services they needed. And I had to talk a lot slower,” she says.

Dr. John Hatch, Kenan Distinguished Professor Emeritus of health behavior and health education, was one of Horna-Guerra’s mentors. “Don’t just ask people what they need,” she remembers Hatch telling her.

“Let’s change the question. Ask them what their dreams are.”

Horna-Guerra says she got surprising responses to that question. Rather than focus on what people lacked, she says she found ways to identify their strengths, inborn talents and assets to help them attain their goals and access services. She’s continuing to do that today.

“North Carolina is different from New York in many ways—not the least of which is the number of uninsured, working poor. People here may be overlooked for various reasons and thus experience limited access to getting their needs met. It’s one of the things that I’m working on changing,” she says with a grin.

— BY LINDA KASTLEMAN

Fiorella Horna-Guerra is a consultant to the North Carolina Farmworker Health Program in the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Rural Health and Community Care. She is a 2006 graduate of the School’s Emerging Leaders in Public Health Program.

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