



Star of the Month

March 2023

Isabel Plakas

School of Nursing



Congratulations to our Star of the Month for March, Isabel Plakas from the School of Nursing! Isabel is a SOURCE Service Scholar working with our amazing community partners at SPARC as an Overdose Response Educator to provide Narcan/Naloxone trainings. Read our interview below to learn more about Isabel's experience serving our community!

Tell us a little bit about yourself. What degree program are you enrolled in? What brought you to Hopkins and the School of Nursing?

My name is Isabel Plakas and I am a second semester nursing student in the direct-entry MSN program. I have spent the past five years working with harm reduction communities in Spain, Philadelphia, Boston and now in Baltimore with SPARC (Sex Workers Promoting Action, Risk Reduction, and Community mobilization).

While working in Boston, I coordinated a mobile medical clinic at Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, that went to different overdose hotspots throughout the city. I had the privilege of working with an incredible team of nurses who were dedicated to providing dignified and stigma-free care to people who use drugs (PWUD). The nurses that took me under their wing were compassionate and fierce advocates, and it was the advice they gave me that encouraged me to apply to nursing school.

I would be remiss if I did not mention how my patients – particularly the ones that trusted me with their case management needs for years – also emboldened me to consider nursing. Without their support, I likely would not have pursued this career.

I knew most accelerated nursing programs lacked financial aid, so I was drawn to the scholarships and opportunities offered at Hopkins. I was also impressed with the harm reduction community in Baltimore, and was excited at the chance to learn from people I admired.

Can you share a little background about your experience as a SOURCE Service Scholar, your Narcan training and the work you are doing?

I first discovered the SOURCE Service Scholar (SSS) program the summer before my first semester at Hopkins when I was browsing the SPARC Instagram. SPARC had posted on their story advertising that they were looking for a 2022-2023 SSS and I immediately applied. Since then, I have enjoyed meeting students from the school of medicine and public health, that I otherwise would not have crossed paths with. I appreciate hearing about the work my cohort is doing, and in the process, learning more about the organizations, leaders, and resources in Baltimore that are making a difference in the community. Being a Scholar also allows me to spend time at the SPARC drop-in and on their van – primarily with my mentors Katie Evans and Marshiek Long, who welcomed me with open arms into their close-knit team, and for which I am so grateful.

As the Overdose Response Educator for SPARC, I provide Narcan/Naloxone trainings to whoever requests it. This includes participants, members of the community, and students, staff and faculty at Hopkins. Overdose response trainings can be as quick as a few minutes– simply showing a participant at the drop-in how to administer Naloxone, or as long as two hours if

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one wants a more nuanced training that goes beyond nasal spray and explains rescue breathing, oxygen administration, Ambu bag usage, and post-overdose care.

I would like to thank my former co-worker, co-president of the Student Nurses for Harm Reduction at Hopkins and close friend Caitlin Pollard for helping me provide these trainings, and for developing a comprehensive guide on post-overdose care that is incredibly valuable for PWUD and medical professionals alike. We recently gave a training to the team at the Bloomberg Overdose Prevention Initiative and it was an honor to get to work with such a lovely and accomplished group of people.

Can you tell us about any other service opportunities you have participated in? Are there any activities where others can get involved in the future?

Primarily my work has been through SPARC, although I am currently collaborating with some students and faculty to expand access to harm reduction knowledge and materials amongst nursing students. SPARC has biweekly volunteer nights on Tuesdays and I would encourage anyone who is interested to reach out and get to know the team. Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition also accepts volunteers and has an amazing group of staff; interested students can submit a form on their website.

I also want to recognize that often service opportunities are inaccessible for lower income students who have to prioritize school work and paid job opportunities. So for those who are interested in working with the community but find it difficult, I empathize, and I would recommend applying to be a

SOURCE Service Scholar as it allows one to work with the community and also receive a stipend from Hopkins.

How does your community work complement what you're learning in the classroom at the School of Nursing?

In reality, my community work contradicts a lot of what is taught in traditional nursing curriculums. Harm Reduction believes that drug use is not inherently bad, and strives to reduce negative bias towards PWUD. One of the easiest ways to do this is through language, such as replacing stigmatizing terms such as substance abuse with substance use.

The consequences of the war on drugs are palpable in the number of people unjustly incarcerated, the innumerable lives lost to fatal overdose, and through more commonplace interactions that people do not realize contribute to the negative bias of drug use. I encourage staff, faculty and students to consider the words they use to describe PWUD, and confront and unlearn the harmful narratives we have been taught. NIDA has a great document titled "Words Matter - Terms to Use and Avoid When Talking About Addiction" that I recommend.

What advice would you give to other students looking to engage in the Baltimore community?

If you do not hear back after reaching out to a person/group/organization, follow up! Life is hectic and emails often get buried. Baltimore is a beautiful city that holds many opportunities, get to know new people every chance you get.

Thank you for your tremendous commitment and service to Baltimore!