Congratulations to our Stars of the Month for March 2021, the Johns Hopkins Health Education and Training (HEAT) Corps volunteers! JH HEAT Corps is a program in which volunteers teach virtual courses on COVID-19 for K-12 students, connecting with classrooms and leaving a major impact both here in Baltimore and nationwide. We spoke with four outstanding volunteer instructors who we celebrate and thank for their incredible commitment and service: Diego Barragan Campuzano (School of Public Health), L Katrin (School of Public Health), Sara Ho (School of Public Health), and Taylor Wynn (School of Nursing).

What has your experience been like volunteering with JH HEAT Corps? What are some skills you’ve gained?

Diego: It has been a blast! I’m really grateful for being able to know so many bright students and engaged teachers since I joined the HEAT Corps volunteers. I’ve gotten a new sense of pride in what I do, it has allowed me to continue to push myself to be updated and learn more about the disease and public health practices to help the young students with their questions (and of course, to help me as a professional). I feel like I’ve gained better communication skills as well as new techniques for speaking to an audience, and it has taught me that with motivation, good information, and fun you can influence people to follow and promote public health strategies!

How do you fit this commitment into your schedule as busy graduate students, and how does it contribute to your education as a health professional?

Taylor: I love leading the classes so I try to sign up for them as much as possible when I am available. I’ve found that it is easier for me to commit to different classes if I just have a designated “JH HEAT” day each week. Otherwise, I would be so lost trying to remember when I’m going to teach, especially when the weeks get busier into the semester. Also, as a healthcare professional patient education is important. JH HEAT has taught me the importance of explaining things in a clear and interesting way based on my audience. It is very different explaining the virus to a sixth grader than a high schooler!

L: Being a JH HEAT Corps Volunteer has been really rewarding and whenever I see posts about available classrooms I try to sign up for times that I am available. With the busy schedule at Hopkins I try to make sure I find time for teaching when I have pockets of free time, whether it is an hour to two hours per week. Being a part of JH HEAT Corps feels like great preparation for my future career ambitions. I am currently working on my MSPH in Social and Behavioral Intervention so getting experience at the classroom level of an education intervention has been amazing. I have learned about the ground-level obstacles one might run into for this type of intervention and I believe it will make me a better public health professional, no matter what stage of an intervention I might be working on.

Sara: As an MHS student, having online and asynchronous classes myself has allowed me to fit in HEAT Corps classes whenever I am available, especially since they are only 45 minutes to an hour each. The HEAT Corps team sends out emails when new class sessions are added, so I’m able to regularly schedule a few classes a week. During the pandemic, I’ve seen how sensitive communication is crucial to distributing new information, especially as a health professional. Being a JH HEAT Corps instructor taught me how to address questions and concerns clearly and respectfully, just as the HEAT Corps curriculum tells students to act in their own communities as new COVID-19 experts.
This experience has shown me firsthand how education is one of the most important preventative tools in public health.

**What’s the most interesting thing you’ve learned about teaching during a pandemic?**

L: Before coming to Hopkins I worked as a Peace Corps Health Education Volunteer in Mongolia, giving me some teaching experience. However, teaching during a pandemic and virtually has proven to be a challenging but also rewarding experience. I have realized that old techniques to maintain a connection and attention of the students did not work as well virtually, so it has been fun to think of new ways and icebreakers to really draw students into the lesson we were doing. It also has been exciting to see how many students from different schools one can reach when using a virtual platform versus going from school to school.

Sara: I haven’t had many teaching experiences prior to joining the HEAT Corps, so I was a little nervous that teaching through a virtual platform would affect my ability to connect with students. I quickly learned that with patience for occasional technical difficulties, being online means being able to reach far more students than in a physical classroom. Some of the classes I’ve taught have had over a hundred students! Making sure to check in with students about their lives both at school and outside has been one way that I’ve been able to really connect with them in addition to the lectures. Being able to support students during the pandemic and answer their questions about COVID-19 and life in general has been the most rewarding aspect of volunteering as a HEAT Corps volunteer.

**How are students responding to learning about COVID-19? What are some meaningful interactions you’ve had with your students?**

Taylor: People have been responding well to learning about COVID. In all the classrooms I’ve taught in the students have been really engaged and eager to ask questions. The meaningful interactions that I’ve had with my students is when I am able to answer questions and talk to them after the lectures. Sometimes I get asked questions such as what I miss doing from before the pandemic and it feels nice being able to have a conversation that isn’t necessarily about the lecture content.

Diego: It has been amazing! There are times when you suddenly get bombarded with questions (that I think for any instructor, that’s a good thing) so you can see how interested they are in the topics, and the range varies from all kinds of interesting things, from “how is the virus attacking the cells?” to “can I wear a triple face mask to be safer?” and it’s so awesome because you can sense that they really want to be informed so that they can make good decisions and influence their family and friends. I remembered some students saying how my huge headphones were exactly like the ones they use or that they felt happy they were still able to celebrate the holidays with their close family members and other students eagerly wanting to jump in to say some facts they learned about the pandemic on their own, and that will stay with me because it reminds me that even though we remain at a distance we’re still connected and that closeness doesn’t fade.

Thank you all for your tremendous service!