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Alumni Profile

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Theresa Betancourt '91

Helping children thrive

Theresa (Stichick) Betancourt '91 cuts through rows of tall corn, smiling as children call out to her on her way to the Inshuti Mu Buzima District Hospital in Rwinkwavu, Rwanda. On this January morning, she and her colleagues will meet a family with nine children. Both parents are HIV positive, and the illness has caused great strain on the family.

"The children were sure their parents would die soon and felt their futures were doomed," explained Betancourt, whose team is developing a family-strengthening intervention. "However, the availability of antiretroviral therapy has changed the playing field. Today, HIV is not a death sentence."

Betancourt, assistant professor of child health and human rights at the Harvard School of Public Health, has followed her passion for helping disadvantaged kids all the way to the African continent. As director of the Research Program on Children and Global Adversity at the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, she is dedicated to improving child health and well-being in parts of the world affected by armed conflicts and HIV/AIDS.

Whether she's on the streets of a Rwandan city, in a war-ravaged village in Sierra Leone or in her Harvard office, Betancourt's focus is always on children and families. Some days she's teaching at Harvard or sharing her information at conferences, while other days she's conducting research in the field, both in the United States and internationally.



At Harvard, Betancourt's team is currently engaged in three in-depth research studies. She is collaborating with Partners in Health and Association Francois-Xavier Bagnoud International in Rwanda to study mental health services needs and develop preventative interventions for children and families affected by HIV/AIDS. She just completed a longitudinal study of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone – the first of its kind to involve male and female former child soldiers across three points of follow-up. Closer to home, Betancourt is studying Somali Bantu refugee children and families in Boston.

Betancourt's interest in helping children took root in rural Alaska as she watched her parents, both teachers, work with indigenous populations in the bush. She came to Linfield as a legacy student, following an aunt, Sandra (Wells) Vitron '77, bringing with her an abundance of interests – psychology, art, French and international studies.

Her work-study experiences with refugee families in Upward Bound crystallized her interest in psychology. In art classes, she discovered the significance of expressive arts in therapy, and later pursued a master's degree in the area. She studied in Paris, Mexico and Turkey.

According to Betancourt, supportive Linfield faculty helped set her on a course toward doing what she loved.

"I had a tremendous experience at Linfield," said Betancourt, who earned a degree in psychology with minors in French and international studies. "I couldn't have even envisioned the work I'm doing now, but I got the support to pursue my interests at Linfield.

"I am grateful to be able to do what I love," she said. "The greatest gift is the chance to know and learn from the incredible resilience and strength of families and children who find ways to thrive in the face of unimaginable hardship."

Betancourt's ability to make connections between different fields found a creative match in her liberal arts background, said Linda Olds, professor emerita of psychology.

"Theresa is a wonderful model of cross-disciplinary commitments," Olds said. "She enriched classes for everybody by bringing a layer of depth and commitment to the education process. It is deeply meaningful to see what she's contributing to the world by following her heart and her skills." ■

– Laura Davis

Theresa (Stichick) Betancourt '91, shown here in Sierra Leone with Binta, left, and Christopher, has learned the importance of adapting intervention to culture. She spent January at a hospital in Rwinkwavu, Rwanda, run collaboratively by the Rwandan government and Partners in Health.