

MAKING A HEALTHY IMPACT

CALS alumna aims to positively impact familial health

BY TREY BARRETT

WHEN JE'KLYNN STEEN first arrived at Mississippi State University as a first-generation undergraduate in 2015, she had her heart set on becoming a family doctor or pediatrician. The Memphis, Tennessee native grew up seeing many illnesses in her community, sparking a passion for health and helping others as a doctor.

However, Steen quickly realized she would find more fulfillment and make a greater impact working with families to better their health through education rather than becoming a medical doctor.

“After I learned how the health care system works, I knew I was not going to be able to make the impact that I wanted to make as a doctor. I found the human development and family science major and it incorporated child and youth development, risk and resilience and family interactions—all areas I wanted to better understand,” Steen said.

As a human development and family science major, Steen was able to translate her love for her family to other families.

“As I got further into the department, my interests were less about directly treating families and addressing health issues. Instead, I wanted to learn how families

function and how health beliefs and behaviors can stem from families,” Steen said.

Steen wanted to explore how she could make a positive impact on families and their health in addition to her classroom learning. She found the answer when she heard **Dr. David Buys** speak at a seminar. Buys is an associate professor in the Department of Food Science, Nutrition and Health Promotion and MSU Extension state health specialist.

“The very first day I met with Dr. Buys, he helped clarify what my specific interests were and how he could help facilitate those interests. I initially asked to shadow him, but he thought a more hands-on experience would be better,” Steen said. “He suggested the Junior Master Wellness Program, which provided me an opportunity to collaborate with the outreach program.”

The Junior Master Wellness Program, a community health education and volunteer leader training program through the MSU Extension 4-H Program, was Steen’s first internship while in the department.

The program is a collaboration in partnership with the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC) and the UMMC/Myrlie Evers-Williams Institute.

“The program trains high school students to become peer health educators. I had the opportunity to create new interactive materials for the students,” Steen said. “I helped create an anti-bullying module describing what bullying is, while creating new activities and editing existing ones. I also helped introduce topics like substance use within the curriculum with the help of Reagan Moak, a community health intern and former biochemistry pre-medicine student at MSU.”

Steen earned her bachelor’s at MSU in 2019 before continuing as a graduate research assistant to pursue a master’s in health promotion that same year. As an assistant, Steen was also involved with the PROMISE Initiative, aimed at preventing opioid misuse across the Southeast.

“When I started working on my graduate degree, I was primarily leading youth and adult mental health first aid trainings. We traveled to places all over Mississippi to train counselors, teachers, and other individuals,” Steen said.

The eagerness to educate people on health issues and the hands-on nature of both projects gave Steen the confidence to continue her studies as a Ph.D. student at Auburn University.



Je'Kylynn Steen (photo by Molly Bartels, Auburn University)



“The more I learned, the more I realized that health outcomes are a systemic issue as well as an education issue. This knowledge motivated me to continue in my studies to make a bigger impact,” Steen said.

Buys and Mary Nelson Robertson, an assistant professor in the School of Human Sciences, were influential in helping Steen recognize her potential to make an impact as a health specialist.

“Dr. Buys was instrumental in connecting me with other professionals who helped me navigate certain spaces

as a Black woman and first generation student. At times, I was insecure being underrepresented in certain spaces, but he and Mary Nelson helped me realize my background was not something to be ashamed of,” Steen said. “They reinstated the aspect of the lived and professional experiences I have and helped me translate that in my academic pursuits. I want to build a bridge between the university and the community.”

Steen has continued to sharpen her skills as an educator through the Alabama Youth Relationship Education

project, bridging research with the community, while at Auburn. After college, she has the desire to become either an extension specialist or work for a federal health organization.

No matter where she goes, however, Steen will always recognize the impact her Mississippi State family has had in her life.

“No matter what the future holds, I know my State family will always uplift me,” Steen said. “They mean so much to me and have a lot of love for what I have accomplished.” 🐾