



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT's SHAWCO recommits to assisting needy communities

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Students' Health and Welfare Centres Organisation ([SHAWCO](#)) has 80 years' worth of stories to tell; however, the organisation is focusing on what the future should hold.

"So, it was on one cold and windy night in mid-July in 1943 that this small group of students went in, and on that night, eight patients came. The clinic had started. In driving gales and pouring rain, this small band continued to visit Kensington. The effort and sacrifice these students made was incredible and their keen sense of duty was truly remarkable."

These are the words attributed to SHAWCO founder, Andrew Kinnear, during the celebration of the 80-year milestone of Africa's largest student-led non-profit organisation. Kinnear, a medical student at the time, drove an ambulance during his university holidays in order to pay for his studies.

His ambulance duties turned out to be a blessing in disguise for communities like Kensington, as Kinnear came face to face with poverty, lack of hygiene and scant medical facilities. He wanted to do something about the situation. He asked Dr Golda Selzer of the pathology department at Groote Schuur Hospital to set up a clinic to lend a hand – and the rest is history.

Today, SHAWCO renders several health-based services to communities and has strengthened its extra-curricular model. According to the current executive director, Dr Jackie Stewart, the future of the organisation is critical in how they would like to reimagine the work they do.

Approximately 2 000 UCT students are involved in SHAWCO, and it is the largest student-led NPO in Africa. "For the last 80 years, I feel SHAWCO has been doing a tried and tested model that has been very successful and that has stood the test of time, but it would be nice, as we enter our 80th year, to look at what we can reimagine about SHAWCO," said Stewart.

Under the auspices of SHAWCO, there are two major pillars: SHAWCO Health and SHAWCO Education (which includes SHAWCO Law).

Stewart shared some of the conversations that have been happening as they chart the way forward. "We are talking with the Faculty of Health Sciences about the possibility of using the mobile health clinics out in the community so that it's not only SHAWCO members who are out in the community, but that medical students can also get an opportunity to be out in the community, so they get a sense of the political and social determinants of health." Currently, the mobile clinics are only being used in the evenings and on Saturdays.

Digital divide

The other frontier Stewart and her team of student leaders hope to address is the digital divide. Because SHAWCO has a very active education programme, it makes sense for them to invest in digital for the students they encounter.

Stewart said: "We have a number of digital super-hubs where we are really trying to address the digital divide and the dream with that is to provide career pathing for high school students, which encompasses all the provisions of digital literacy and pointing those with an interest in coding and robotics in the right direction." This, she said, will be done with funding from and in collaboration with Dell Technologies and Hosken Consolidated Investments.

Several other projects uppermost on Stewart's list include working closely with the Global Surgery unit in the Faculty of Health Sciences "to increase the number of screenings in our women's clinics for cervical cancer".

Furthermore, they plan to work closely with community health workers to provide more comprehensive training. One final goal is to "pilot a surgical day clinic at Kensington Community Centre, which would be apt because that's where it all started".

Stand in the gap

SHAWCO Health president, Christian Tereze, said his first interaction with the organisation put him at the coalface of the work he would be doing in his future career, which is why he grabbed the opportunity to join.

"The first interaction was impactful for me, because at that moment I realised that is what I want to do for the rest of my life: to see and speak with patients, and that's also when I got perspective about what it is that I was studying and what it would mean for me and the community," said Tereze.

"Why is the work we do important? It's the ability to provide primary healthcare services to communities. As well-run as the healthcare system is in the Western Cape, there are still people who are left without primary healthcare in places like Masiphumelele, Khayelitsha, Kensington.

"We are able to stand in that gap and assist where people would not necessarily get the care. People who are part of SHAWCO believe in it and what it is capable of doing. SHAWCO has provided a lifetime of services."

Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News.



SHAWCO executive director, Dr Jackie Stewart.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5672
Cell: 063 366 3993 / 072 563 9500
Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za