

BLUE SKY FACULTY FOLIO

INSPIRED





Pursuit for Perspective

A quest to save lives and prevent injury through greater understanding of others

Growing up in Denver, the snowcapped peaks of the Front Range were a constant reminder for Marian "Emmy" Betz, MD, MPH, of the vast expanse awaiting on the other side. Betz attended Manual High School in northeast Denver with classmates who came from diverse backgrounds and viewed the world through a different lens than her own.

Both of her parents are PhD scientists with ties to the University Colorado School of Medicine. Her father, Bill, is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Physiology and Biophysics and her mother, Joan, conducted post-doctoral research in microbiology before leading a distinguished teaching career in higher education.

"I GREW UP IN A FAMILY WITH A LOT OF SCIENCE," BETZ SAYS. "MY PARENTS HAD A STRONG BELIEF IN THE POWER OF SCIENCE TO HELP MAKE THE WORLD BETTER. IT'S IMPORTANT TO ME TO DO WHAT I CAN TO MAKE THE WORLD A LITTLE BETTER EACH DAY."

Her quest to contribute to the global greater good sent her far from Colorado, where she visited many other states, countries,

and cultures. Spending a year abroad during high school and another after medical school, every encounter was a valuable opportunity to Betz to learn.

After high school, Betz headed to Yale University for her undergraduate work. She took a year off after earning her degree, broadening her horizons through teaching at an American school in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. She returned to the United States to attend medical school at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

“Travel instilled in me a love for understanding how other people do things and appreciating the chance to see the world from a different point of view,” Betz says. “That’s a big part of what I do today.”

During her first year of medical school, Betz worked at National Institutes of Health where she first learned a Master of Public Health degree existed. She had always been drawn to her mother’s microbiology textbooks and hearing stories about infectious disease experts working as medical detectives, tracking down the pathogens and microbes that drive devastating maladies like malaria.

“There was a little bit of ‘saving the world’ in those stories. I had a strong desire to do good for the world and public health fulfilled that for me,” Betz, who applied to Johns Hopkins MPH program while she was in medical school.

After earning both degrees, she completed a clinical rotation at Johns Hopkins emergency department, an area she did not initially anticipate working in.

“But I liked it every time I was in the ER,” Betz recalls. “I liked the people working there and the work itself.”

She went on to complete an emergency medicine residency



at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, where she was chief resident. It was there she realized the emergency room was a better fit for her than the medical detective in single-minded pursuit of a rogue microbe. Of many impactful experiences during that time, one stands out to this day.

During the third year of Betz’s residency, she helped care for an adolescent boy who was brain dead and receiving supportive care while his family deliberated donating his organs. Bullied in school, he had taken his own life.

“His teenage brain didn’t consider the consequences,” Betz says, who couldn’t shake the thought of the unnecessary and avoidable death that lay ahead from the boy’s impulsive act.

Suicide has personally impacted Betz and she’s witnessed the ripple effect of their actions. As she built her public health career in injury prevention, those experiences motivated her to find ways to prevent fatal self-injuries, particularly those caused by firearms, the most used weapon in suicides.

“IT’S ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HAS KEPT ME IN THE FIELD,” BETZ SAYS. “IF I CAN DO SOMETHING TO HELP OTHER FAMILIES SUFFERING FROM LOSS, THAT FEELS IMPORTANT TO ME.”

Near the end of her residency, Betz made an important professional connection with Matthew Miller, MD, a leading gun violence researcher at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Bonding over their interest in injury prevention, they co-authored many articles on firearm ownership, storage, and suicide. But at that time, Betz says, she wasn’t yet ready for it to be her focus.

She returned to Colorado to work on research and strategies to prevent injury to older drivers, amassing a considerable body of work in the field, before reentering the firearm space.

A key motivator was her frustration that suicide was left out of debates focusing on protecting against mass shootings and community violence – neither of which she said should be overlooked.

In a 2015 TEDxMileHigh talk, Betz noted 9 in 10 people who attempt suicide with a gun will die, but only 1 in 10 who survive a suicide attempt will go on to take their life.

SHE ADVOCATED FOR PHYSICIAN COUNSELING AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY – A PHYSICIAN’S WORK TO REDUCE FIREARMS INJURIES AND DEATHS MUST BE BALANCED WITH THE RIGHTS AND VALUES OF THOSE WHO OWN THEM.

Not content with simply speaking or writing about the subject, Betz entered “an awkward first conversation” with Michael Victoroff, MD, a Denver-area physician, firearms instructor, and competitive shooter. He contacted her to begin a dialogue after reading her editorial.

“I had a lot to learn about the culture and community of gun owners,” she admits.

She took the NRA basic pistol course with Victoroff as her teacher, alongside a few other physicians. Victoroff taught them about the guns and how to handle them, then led them to a firing range to shoot a few rounds. For Betz, the experience wasn’t entirely comfortable because she’d never been around guns during her life.

“It was important for me to realize why people fire guns – as a hobby, to relieve stress, or as a sport – to be in that world and talk to people. It’s like traveling and learning about other cultures,” she says.

With every such potentially lifesaving conversation spurred, and the many miles traveled physically and intellectually, Betz continues her commitment to improve the world that her parents instilled.

“Medicine is one way to do that,” she says. “Not the only way, but it is one way.” ■

