

## Public Health Hero is a Champion of Teens

# Dr. Barbara Staggers, '76, M.P.H. '80



Photo: Gery Turchin for Children's Hospital Oakland

**Doctor Mom:** William, the eldest of her three children, visits Dr. Barbara Staggers at work.

A summer job during high school proved to be life-changing for Barbara Staggers. The high achieving teen who aspired to be a ballerina or maybe a veterinarian was working for a recreation program for inner-city kids. “My job was to teach swimming and gymnastics so at the end of the day they’d be too tired to get into trouble,” she recalls. Among her youngsters was a quiet, beautiful 14-year old girl — until a man came to take her away. “He looked like the classic pimp from the movies and said he needed her to work,” recounts Staggers, who went to her supervisor. But when they phoned the girl’s mother, she said, “Let her go. We need the money.”

“I was 18 then and I’m 53 now, but I can still close my eyes and see that young lady’s face,” says Staggers. “I don’t know what happened to her. She just disappeared off the face of the Earth, but I’ll never forget her.”

And she hasn’t. As chief of the division of Adolescent Medicine at Children’s Hospital and Research Center in Oakland, Staggers has devoted her career to helping teens at risk. Many of the kids who come to her for a “check-up” (a term that can mean almost anything) are looking for love, food and shelter, and a place to be safe. Some of them don’t expect to reach adulthood, and some won’t. Others are more resilient and will rise above their circumstances. All of them, she says, need to be parented and loved unconditionally. “There has to be one person in their life that, come hell or high water, is going to be there for them.”

Growing up, Staggers and her siblings certainly had that, and more. “When I look back on my life, the reason I was able to do the things I

did and take the challenges I took was because my parents always told us we were respected, we were valued, we were loved,” says Staggers. Her mother had attended college at age 16, and her father was the first African-American surgical sub-specialist trained by the United States Navy. In later years, he served as president of the California Medical Association. From him, she learned that a physician can also be a social worker, a political advocate, and an educator.

With a desire to serve the most underserved, Staggers came to Berkeley to study psychology. Here she met Professor Reginald L. Jones, a pioneer in the field of Black Psychology, who became a mentor and guided her toward medical school at UCSF. After completing her M.D., Staggers returned to Berkeley for a Master of Public Health, and then went back to UCSF to complete the Adolescent Medicine Fellowship Program.

She believes strongly that adolescent health-care requires a public health perspective. “To me, it’s about the things that kill teenagers, not traditional medicine,” Staggers explains, noting that automobile accidents, homicides, and suicides account for 65 percent of adolescent deaths.

To promote prevention, Staggers persuaded Children’s Hospital to establish school-based clinics at McClymonds and Castlemont high schools in Oakland. There, teens can find a caring staff and talk openly about issues with eating disorders, sexuality, drugs, and alcohol. Staggers helps them learn how to make good decisions, “so they don’t do something that they’ll pay for with the rest of their lives.”

She and a colleague also developed a three-year internship called Faces for the Future to encourage teens to stay in school and go on to college. A “pipeline program,” it partners with local medical schools to introduce minority high school students to the health professions.

Recognized nationally for her work, her Berkeley honors include the Peter E. Haas Public Service Award (2004), the School of Public Health Alumna of the Year (2006), and, this spring, the Regional Public Health Hero Award (2008).

— Lisa Harrington