

# Professor to Spend Summer Bringing Better Mental Health Care to the Central African Republic

By Julia Reischel

This summer, Assistant Professor of Family Therapy Laurie Lopez Charlés will leave the comfort of her office in Wheatley Hall to volunteer with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors Without Borders) in Central African Republic, a country that most other aid operations avoid for safety reasons.

“It’s understood that you’re going to a place where there is conflict,” she says, explaining that she and her husband are preparing for her departure by updating their wills. “I’m definitely prepared to go. After last summer, I’m much more aware of my priorities.”

Last summer, Charlés received a diagnosis of a hidden health problem that could have killed her at any time. It was a bolt from the blue, and it transformed her life.

“In between classes, I remember working on my will,” she says. “I had to plan how to program my cell phone so that someone could reach [my husband] if I died on the T.”

A complicated procedure cured the problem, but the reminder of her own mortality in the midst of her otherwise safe and comfortable life in Boston brought her life goals into sharp, fresh focus.

“That experience really clarified what I want to do,” she says.

As a mental health officer stationed with a MSF staff in CAR for the next few months, Charlés will work with a team of volunteers distributing free health care to the traumatized population of the city and the surrounding countryside, which has been scarred by years of coups and rebel uprisings. The country’s proximity to higher-profile crisis

zones like the Darfur region of Sudan adds to the insecurity, and most aid organizations consider the country too unstable to send their workers there.

This is where MSF comes in—the international humanitarian group’s mission is to provide emergency medical aid in dangerous places, and it currently has over one hundred staff members in CAR. The danger they face is serious: In March, a woman was shot and killed while she was taking care of a patient in an MSF vehicle.

Charlés’s role in MSF will be to help build a mental health component of MSF’s CAR mission. She will both conduct therapy sessions with traumatized CAR citizens and teach other volunteers and locals how to do so.

It’s the same work that she does at UMass Boston, where she provides therapy to families displaced by war and violence and trains graduate family therapy students to do the same. The skills she has honed at UMass Boston, as well as her French-language skills (CAR is a Francophone country), are the reasons why she was chosen for the MSF post.

Over the course of her career, Charlés has been no stranger to violence. She spent 18 months in the Peace Corps in Togo, a West African country where, she says, there were “guns everywhere.” For her doctoral dissertation at Nova Southeastern University in Florida, Charlés conducted an exhaustive study of the dynamics of hostage negotiation during a school shooting. She interviewed FBI and police crisis negotiators, listened to numerous audio recordings of live hostage negotiations, and traveled to the FBI Academy in Virginia to conduct



*This summer won’t be the first time Laurie Lopez Charlés has worked in dangerous surroundings. (Photo by Harry Brett)*

research. The resulting case study is an intricate account of how to communicate with people in dangerous situations.

What ties all of her work together, she says, is her interest in “how people elicit information in difficult circumstances,” and her desire to put that information to therapeutic use.

Her field strives to do exactly that. Its goal is to “look at people in their context.” The field focuses on those who are the least likely to be able to navigate the state aid system on their own—“the people

who don’t show up,” as Charlés calls them, referring to refugees, victims of domestic violence, and illegal immigrants.

Charlés came to UMass Boston’s Family Therapy department two years ago because she admired the school’s emphasis on serving exactly these groups. “It was mainly the urban mission,” she says. “It was impressive to me that the university talked about this. I needed to be someplace where I *want* to have tenure.”

At UMass, Charlés and her students study the problems

inherent in providing therapy to marginalized groups in Boston. This fall, she and her students will use funds from a Joseph P. Healey Endowment Grant to conduct ethnographic interviews with recipients of aid in Boston on the subject of “resilience.” What they learn they will use to improve the therapy they give to their clients.

“How do we incorporate them into our research—especially in health? What practices do we use to try to understand their experience?” Charlés asks. Answering her own question, she says that the key is humility. “It’s a position of curiosity you have to take. You have to let it all go. If you can make yourself an outsider, that’s a conducive way to learn.”

This lesson, which she will teach to her students next fall, she will learn again firsthand in CAR this summer as she struggles to understand and help the mental health problems of refugees and victims of violence living half a world away.

“I really think this is the kind of thing that you can do at UMass,” she says. “My students work with refugee clients; we also have students who *are* refugees. I am hoping that my experience in CAR will be an important contribution to the department.”

As for the fact that she will be plunging herself into danger overseas, Charles says that though she is apprehensive, she knows that going to CAR will make her a better family therapist.

“[Travel] is how I get humbled about what I think I know. And the humility is what makes my work good,” she says. “And why not me? The people who live there have to live there every day.”