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‘Rising star’ graduate: Sylvia Ofori’s journey from Ghana to Georgia Southern to Harvard

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Sylvia Ofori

On her first flight from Ghana to the United States, Sylvia Ofori arrived in Atlanta, Georgia, at 1 a.m. By 4 o’clock the next afternoon, Ofori was in her first American classroom in Georgia Southern University’s Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health on the Statesboro Campus.

Jet-lagged and attempting to absorb a foreign campus and classroom procedures, Ofori was out of sorts when her professor, Isaac Chun-Hai Fung, Ph.D., encouraged her to apply for a student research position following class introductions.

Within days, she’d interviewed and earned the spot, supported by funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In their first meeting, Fung challenged Ofori to publish 10 papers by the end of her public health doctoral program.

“I wasn’t familiar with publications, but he threw that challenge at me from the beginning,” Ofori remembered. “Wow. His plan was for me to start working on dissertation-related projects immediately.”

Ofori’s first project was a scoping review on [the use of digital technology to improve and monitor handwashing in children](#). Following a presentation of her review at the University’s 2019 Research Symposium, her work was published in an academic journal, and many more followed as co-author with Fung and another mentor, Kamalich Muniz-Rodriguez, DrPH.

By the end of her doctoral training, Sylvia had published 11 papers with Fung, and three more manuscripts will be submitted.

Today, Ofori will earn a DrPH in public health with a concentration in epidemiology as she crosses the stage in one of two Savannah commencement ceremonies. In June, she’ll begin as a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Epidemiology at Harvard University to continue global public health research she began at Georgia Southern.

Ofori also heads to Boston with a 2022 Georgia Southern Averitt Award for Excellence in Graduate Research and experience working on the University’s COVID-response team within

the office of the dean of students. She was also a student mentor and worked part time for Ionis Pharmaceuticals, a California-based company that researches rare diseases.

“She is a rising star in her field,” said Fung of Ofori.

As the daughter of a nurse, Ofori grew up amid attention to public welfare. Later, she earned an undergraduate degree in pharmacy from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and a Master of Public Health from the Ensign College of Public Health of Ghana.

Following, she served as a community pharmacist in one of the busiest areas of Ghana. It was there that Ofori was exposed to especially vulnerable populations, which inspired her to pursue public health at the highest level.

Ofori’s dissertation centered around COVID-19 practices in Ghana, employing mathematical models to understand transmission dynamics, and to compare the impact or effectiveness of interventions implemented against the disease.

As a Harvard Fellow, she’ll lead mentored research projects on modeling infectious diseases and train public health professionals in Africa on how to use the models in their daily work. For the latter part, she will travel to Rwanda to teach the basic concepts of epidemiology, and develop curriculum for training programs.

“My career goal is to implement training programs for low-and middle-income countries,” said Ofori. “So having that experience would prepare me for that. “

Another intent is to inform policy in Ghana, and she looks forward to presenting her research findings at multiple conferences this fall in her home country.

“Showing evidence like this would kind of be a wake-up call to the government and many people to push vaccines to the country,” said Ofori. “That is the most impactful.”

The chance to create a paradigm shift in health care is incredibly meaningful to Ofori.

“It’s rewarding doing something that could actually lead to change, or that people or health care professionals will use your work and your recommendations to make changes to whatever they are working with,” she noted. “I’m pretty honored to do something like that.”

Today, as a researcher trained at Georgia Southern, Ofori feels prepared for her next steps.

“I feel fulfilled through the training and mentorship, and the networking opportunities I’ve had,” she said. “I feel like that built me into a researcher and will prepare me for whatever challenges that I face in the future. And through my experience here, I know people to connect with when I have challenges, and I know how to identify resources to make me a better researcher.”

Fung’s investment in her as a student and a professional can’t be understated.

“It’s been an amazing experience,” said Ofori. “I didn’t think we would get this far in terms of the number of projects we worked on. I’m really grateful that he took that chance on me that first day.

“There were projects that he asked me to do and I felt like, ‘I can’t do this. I don’t think I’m prepared for this.’ But he would let me know the resources I can use. Pushing me to reach my potential has been a really rewarding experience. I’m so grateful to him for the four years that I have been at Georgia Southern.”

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