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CHRISTOPHER MORALES wasn't sure what to do with his life after high school, so he enlisted in the U.S. Army to "grow up and figure it out."

Serving as a medic for four-and-a-half years, Morales worked with health-care professionals who made sure people who needed care received it, regardless of their environment or circumstance. He was especially inspired by the level of care provided by physician assistants and realized he'd found his life purpose. He now plans his future as a physician assistant providing community health care.

The California State University, Sacramento, graduate looked at a variety of schools, but what he found in the program offered through the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis best fit his vision.

"I chose the physician assistant program at UC Davis because it is community oriented," Morales says. "I knew I would have an opportunity to work in my community right away."

The Master of Health Services — Physician Assistant Studies is one of four graduate degree programs that make up the Nursing Science and Health-Care Leadership Graduate Degree Program. The programs are led by an interprofessional team of more than 50 faculty members from disciplines including nursing, medicine, health informatics, nutrition, biostatistics, pharmacy, sociology and public health.

"UC Davis really makes it clear that people there collaborate with others, that working



in the community is important," he explained.

The UC Davis physician assistant program is unique, Morales said, because the students learn with other health students, including nurse practitioners, medical and nursing students — the only program in the nation to do so.

"By learning together, physician assistant and nurse practitioner students are exposed to both medical and nursing perspectives prior to the clinical training for their profession," said Debra Bakerjian, senior director for the two programs.

The physician assistant and nurse practitioner programs focus on developing providers who are prepared to deliver care in areas where it's needed most, thus expanding access for a growing population, Bakerjian said.

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—Physician assistant student
Christopher Morales

Physician assistant students Jonathan Sanz, left, and Christopher Morales, middle, and medical student Madeleine Hanks, right, work together at the Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic in Sacramento.

"With the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, more than 6 million Californians gained access to health care," Bakerjian said.

The UC Davis School of Medicine Community and Family Medicine Department first offered a physician assistant graduate certificate program in 1982 through a unique partnership with Stanford University. In 2013, the program was reconfigured into the 27-month master's-degree program provided through the nursing school.

About 67 percent of UC Davis physician assistant graduates work in underserved areas. Nearly 70 percent of graduates work in primary care, compared to significantly lower national averages of between 30 and 40 percent. For Morales, this emphasis on community care is essential, along with the opportunity to begin providing that care early as a student.

"As a student, I can begin hands-on

care right away," Morales said. "That's a fabulous opportunity."

While an undergraduate student, Morales volunteered at the Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic in Sacramento, a student-run clinic led by UC Davis medical students that provides health care to intravenous drug users, sex workers and their families. After enrolling in the physician assistant program in summer 2013, Morales immediately got to work developing a path for physician assistant and nurse practitioner students to also serve in leadership positions at the clinic.

Now, several Nursing Science and Health-Care Leadership students volunteer at the student-run clinics, where they learn and deliver primary-care services along with medical students, together improving access to care in underserved communities.

For Morales, UC Davis is the one that provided an opportunity to become the physician assistant he dreams to be.

"No one offers a program like this," he said.

Once he graduates in 2015 and earns his license, Morales says he hopes to not only continue working in the Sacramento region, but maybe even someday return to the Army and once again serve his nation, this time as a physician assistant.

Morales is the 2014-15 recipient of the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing General Scholarship Fund which supports his education at the school.

PLEASE FEEL FREE to share this or contact us with any comments or questions. **We welcome your feedback. For more information, visit nursing.ucdavis.edu or contact the School of Nursing at 916-734-2145 or at BettyIreneMooreSON@ucdmc.ucdavis.edu.**