

AN EXCHANGE OF RESPECT

BY AMELIA JOHNSON, BIOLOGY STUDENT

To say it simply, SLO Bangers is compassion in action.

I began volunteering at the syringe exchange during my sophomore year when I decided to pursue a career as a doctor. I hoped to gain experience working directly with a stigmatized population but had no idea that working with our participants would strengthen my desire to practice medicine even more.

SLO Bangers Syringe Exchange is a safe, positive and welcoming environment for all who walk through its doors. This organization provides services to a stigmatized population that is often mistreated and disrespected. Through volunteering, I've learned how to show respect to each and every person and have also come to understand that trust is something you must build. This perspective will help me be a better doctor.

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There is an existing stigma in medicine against people who use illegal drugs, the unsheltered, the previously incarcerated and many other marginalized communities. Validating all patients' experiences and providing care equally is really important. To do this, I'm continuously learning how to examine, discuss and confront my own unconscious biases and misperceptions through meaningful interactions with other students, volunteers and participants.

I now aspire to be a doctor who practices harm reduction, expanding on the skills I've acquired at the syringe exchange.

While volunteering at SLO Bangers I was able to provide life-saving tools to people in need for the first time, and I am hooked. Currently, many drugs are contaminated with fentanyl, a strong synthetic opioid, that often causes overdoses. SLO Bangers distributes naloxone, an opioid



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overdose reversal drug, and trains people on how to use it throughout the local community, including in the county jail where inmates have a high risk of experiencing or witnessing an overdose. To date, our participants have saved many important lives in our community.

The volunteers and participants have taught me that we can make a greater impact working together. The volunteers at the syringe exchange bring together a variety of strengths, skills and experiences to support the same cause. Our individual connections allow us to build community partnerships, opening new opportunities to reach more people. In addition, as volunteers talk with family, friends, coworkers and peers about our personal experiences, we share why these services are valuable, hopefully gaining new support.

In the future, I will continue to address the stigmas our participants experience every day. There is so much more to learn, and I am eager to grow and serve my community in this new chapter. //



Pictured: (top) Amelia Johnson volunteers at the SLO Bangers Syringe Exchange and Overdose Prevention Program. **(left)** Professor Candace Winstead and biology and psychology alumnus Tophie Boreham ('16), a volunteer, discuss services at the syringe exchange. **Photographer:** Joe Johnston