

SP Road Trip: Reflections on ASPE's SP Day

By Jamie Fair, and some members of the Training Team at University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine



SPs in the lobby of Downtown Marriot Indianapolis. Left to Right: Briana Tierno, Karen Merritt, Jamie Fair, and Gina Preciado

well as three other Training Team SPs from the University of Pittsburgh (myself included) picked up at SP Day, part of the 2014 ASPE Conference in Indianapolis.

Blood oozed out of a gash that spanned several inches of Gina Preciado's forearm as she pumped gas into her Honda Civic. "Oh my gosh ... lady, are you alright?" exclaimed a concerned young man nearby, his voice jumping several octaves, eyes wide with fear. Thankfully, the gash was no more than a remnant of a Medical Moulage workshop, a fun and eerily realistic skill that Gina, as

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Karen Merritt, Ms. Preciado, Briana Tierno and I have all been a part of the Standardized Patient program at UPSOM for at least four years, some of us as long as seven. (We even have SPs who have been on the job for as long as fourteen years, which is not a bad a retention rate for a part time job!) The four of us piled into Gina's cost-saving Hybrid on a sunny Friday morning and set out on a six hour road trip from the Steel City to Indianapolis, where ASPE's annual conference was being held. Each of us hoped to meet other SPs from around the country, share experiences with one another, and better our abilities in serving our learner population. A mixture of hands-on seminars, such as learning to simulate abnormal physical findings like a collapsed lung, as well as lectures covering topics from teaching empathy to the history of the National Board Step 2 SC exam, were featured as part of the day-long event.

One thing that I have learned as an SP is that no two people learn in exactly the same way. As a Training Team member, a group of about a dozen SPs at UPSOM who assist our program director, Valerie Fulmer, in hiring and training new and veteran SPs, I hoped to gain new ways of approaching the basic tools an SP uses. Partnering with a gentleman from Kentucky and giving him "feedback" on how close he was to getting a paper ball into a waste basket behind him helped me to visualize, in a concrete way, just how specific feedback has to be in order for

it to be useful. It was clear that telling him that he was “close that time,” was not nearly as helpful as explaining that “the ball was a little to the left and fell short. When your wrist was relaxed, the ball had more of an arc in the air.” Armed with that new knowledge, my NBA-ready acquaintance made not one, but two shots in a row! I thought this was such a simple and fun way to illustrate the importance of highlighting specific skills that we observe in our learners, and one that would be easy to replicate in future training sessions.



The conference was not all work. We arrived a day early and met for dinner at Palomino, an upscale Italian restaurant, where we enjoyed robust wines and delicious seafood and pastas entrees. We walked briefly around the downtown area, and were impressed with the intricacy of the area’s architecture, and how easy it was to get around on foot or by car.

Speaking of cars, the hybrid Civic was not the only thing that made this trip affordable. ASPE



Food and fun were had at Palomino (top,) then we walked off the calories in this park near the hotel.

greatly helped us afford the conference by charging a reasonable \$50 registration fee, and graciously treated all of the attending SPs to lunch at one of the restaurants in the hotel. As Gina observed, “Being able to carpool with three others was helpful for expenses. It wasn't too far away, so it was doable.” I personally set myself a budget for all my trip expenses, registration included, and was actually able to come in under budget, even with a few unexpected expenses. We delegated responsibilities amongst ourselves, with Briana taking the lead on some of the most important issues, like hotel reservations and logistics. Even as a new mother, “Bree,” as we call her, was the driving force in getting our group together, presenting the group

with information on the hotel, the drive, and other factors that made our decision-making easier. Karen wondered if, “...perhaps, in the future, we could find funds to support the endeavor and, if conference is within driving distance, organize more car pools.” We had several other colleagues who had seriously considered attending, but for either transportation or financial reasons were unable to. As I have yet to meet an SP who does not have at least one other job, I thought Karen’s idea about finding a way to generate funds for those who would benefit from the conference was a great idea.

One of the things I most value about being so close with my co-workers is the honesty and new perspectives that I gain during a de-brief session following a student event. Our drive home was no different. We all agreed that the medical moulage and abnormal physical findings session

was both fun and informative. In fact, Briana planned to use her new skills to apply a black eye and bruises to make an abuse case that much more realistic just a few weeks after the conference. We were all fascinated by the diversity of the programs represented; one program even consisted of a single SP because it was so new. Now knowing that some programs are more established than others, we began to wonder if it would be possible for SP Day at ASPE to offer a wider variety of programming so that each SP had more opportunities to choose workshops that fit their particular interests and needs. We felt that some of the lectures were fairly basic and we would have loved to learn higher level skills and discussed more advanced topics. We all wondered aloud if, in the future, the planners might have an advanced level offering for several of the core SP skills, such as feedback or advanced case portrayal.

Much like our SP co-workers here in Pittsburgh, the backgrounds and stories of SPs in attendance were varied and fascinating. After hearing stories from the personal and professional lives of our fellow attendees as part of an ice breaker , (such as one woman who was tackled by a Secret Service agent for feeling the flexed bicep of a former president), all four of us wished we'd had more time to get to talk and network with the other SP professionals. Perhaps hosting a welcome happy hour or official dinner in the future would allow for a structured yet relaxed social setting, and eliminate the need to spend time on Trip Advisor scouting out local restaurants. (Can you guess what my job for the trip was? Meal planning!)

We left Indianapolis that evening a little tired. Later that night, in an empty Wendy's, we had too good of a laugh at the concern of the twenty-something man who was so effected by the state of Gina's arm only hours earlier (it caught the eye of the cashier at Wendy's, too!) We explained that we had just come from a workshop, and that Gina had left her "effects make up" on, hoping to pull a prank on her husband when she got home that night. People outside the medical field may be intrigued or befuddled by the nature of SP work, but I think my dear friend Gina summed up what all four of us felt as we pulled back on to I-70 East that night: "I left there feeling a bit prouder of what we do."



Bruises and blisters and cuts; Briana Tierno admires her handiwork at the Medical Moulage and Abnormal Findings workshop.