

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

*A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—
often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians*

Katherine Shea, MD, MPH



Katherine Shea understands the complexities of health. After she graduated cum laude from the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center and completed residencies in preventive medicine and pediatrics at the University of North Carolina (UNC)-Chapel Hill, Shea worked in pediatric clinical practices and university student health centers for many years. It was during this time that she experienced a life-changing moment. One of her patients underwent a substantial change in behavior, moving from an unhealthy lifestyle to one that fostered good health. Although Shea was pleased by the patient's efforts, the feeling was dampened somewhat by the perceptible decrease in the quality of air around her. In short, Shea realized that the best decisions about personal health will be for naught if concomitant steps are not taken to improve the environment.

With this mind-set, Shea turned her focus toward environmental health and returned to the Gillings School of Global Public Health at UNC-Chapel Hill, to pursue an MPH in environmental sciences and engineering. Shea has since served on numerous environmental health committees, boards, and task forces at the local, national, and international level, including the Intergovernmental Forum for Chemical Safety, the American Academy of Pediatrics National Committee on Environmental Health, the Board of Directors of Toxic Free NC, and the Chapel Hill Sustainable Community Visioning Task Force.

In recent years, Shea focused on climate change, and she became executive director of North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light (NCIPL) in November 2010. NCIPL is a program of the North Carolina Council of Churches and aims to help people of faith understand that climate change is a serious issue being driven by human behavior and that activities that harm the earth are in opposition to what is written in religious texts. Shea has made a substantial impact since arriving. "She has come into what is a fairly complicated organization—managing staff, volunteers, a board of directors, funding, and public policy issues—and has taken the reins fairly quickly and very effectively," remarked George Reed, executive director of the North Carolina Council of Churches. "Her presence has inspired the current leaders within NCIPL to do greater things."

Shea has a deep passion for improving the environment and the health of children, and she has made these issues her life's vocation. When asked what motivates her most to do this work, she explained, "I think we're in deep trouble. I have 2 children who are the light of my life, and I want to be able to say on my deathbed that I did everything I could to help." **NCMJ**

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