

Keeping Buckeyes healthy: Epidemiologist Anna Jean (Petroff) Sauter

by Lois Levihn

- LL: Anna Jean, would you please share your Macedonian background with us?
- AJPS: My Dedo and Baba, were John and Helen Petroff, both proud Macedonians and children of immigrants. I was fortunate to have lived a block away from them while growing up. As such, we got to experience Bab making zelnik, pita, stuffed peppers and other traditional foods. We also went to all of the local MPO dances!
- LL: Your wedding photos are just lovely. Did you have any Macedonian or family traditions as part of the wedding?
- AJPS: Obviously, we had an Orthodox Ceremony, but in addition to that we had traditional dances at the reception, including the bread dance. I also carried a white hankie with lace embroidery which my Baba had crocheted for me when I was a baby.
- LL: How did you first get interested in epidemiology and what made you decide to make it your career?
- AJPS: Well, this job kind of fell into my lap -- I hadn't planned on entering a career in public health. In fact, my masters is in Environmental Science! I was searching for jobs after graduate school and thought I would give this a try since it required statistics and problem-solving skills. After all numbers are numbers, no matter what discipline you choose to apply them to, so I gave public health a try and fell in love with it!
- LL: What exactly does an epidemiologist do?
- AJPS: One thing to remember about public health is that it deals with the health of the population, as compared to medicine, which deals with the health of an individual. In public health, our patient is the community. As an epidemiologist at a local health department, it is my job to keep tabs on the health of my community by conducting disease surveillance, investigating outbreaks, and analyzing health data to determine our health priorities. It is my job to prevent disease, promote healthy lifestyles, and protect the health of my community.
- LL: Do you feel a bit like Nancy Drew solving health puzzles?
- AJPS: Sometimes, yes! Outbreak investigations, while stressful at times, are always exciting because every investigation is different. I learn something new every day.
- LL: What is the most interesting work you have done to date.
- AJPS: I'd have to say the most interesting work I've ever done is with the nation-wide hepatitis A outbreak that has been occurring since 2016. When you hear hepatitis A, most people think about contaminated food or water. However, in the US hep A is more commonly spread from person-to-person. This outbreak reached Ohio in early 2018. One tricky part of this outbreak was that there was no single cause -- there was no "patient 0," if you will. This was considered a "community outbreak."
- Another tricky part of this investigation was the population at highest risk for infection: people who use drugs, people experiencing homelessness, men who have sex with men, and people who are currently or recently incarcerated. Part of my job was to interview cases, identify their contacts, and work to get those people vaccinated against hep A in order to prevent further spread of the disease. These transient populations were hard to get a hold of -- often times, they didn't have a working phone number or home address. Most of the time, they didn't want to speak with someone representing a government agency. Our standard investigation methods weren't working. We had to get creative.
- We organized free vaccine clinics in places like the local soup kitchen, the jail, and drug treatment centers. Instead of asking contacts of people diagnosed with hep A to come to the health department to get vaccinated, we went to them and administered vaccines in their homes. We did whatever we could to get the proper services to the right people.
- LL: Have you and your colleagues received any recognition for your work?
- AJPS: No, not necessarily. Although, I did just receive a promotion! I am now the Supervisor for Assessment and Surveillance. In addition to my epidemiologist duties, I now also manage our tuberculosis clinic and our syringe exchange program.
- LL: If given the opportunity, would you travel to another country to educate/assist with health issues?
- AJPS: I think that would be a great learning experience!
- LL: What advise would you give our TRIBUNE readers to maintain their health?
- AJPS: Disease prevention is simple: Wash your hands and cover your cough!
- LL: Just like our mothers always tell us to do! Many thanks for sharing with us. We wish you and Paul a happy, healthy and blessed New Year!

