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University of South Florida St. Petersburg, Office of University Advancement.

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Beginning Wednesday, Aug. 19, Tiffany Chenneville, associate professor in the Department of Psychology at USF St. Petersburg, will spend more than two weeks in Kenya to conduct pediatric Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) research. Her research is being supported by a $50,000 gift from an anonymous donor.

“It’s very rare to have someone fund an opportunity to grow a project like this,” said Chenneville, who has served as USFSP faculty since 2004 and has a joint appointment with the Department of Pediatrics in the USF College of Medicine. “It’s really exciting and I’m very grateful.”

The trip is an opportunity for Chenneville to serve as a representative of the university and to begin developing a long-term collaboration for research with Springs of Hope Kenya, an orphanage in Nakuru, Kenya. During her time there, she will meet and work with children who have HIV, meet with orphanage workers, and work with the local schools, clinics, doctors and key stakeholders from the surrounding community.
Chenneville, whose interest in HIV research began in the mid-90s when a friend was diagnosed with the disease, has worked as a clinical and behavioral psychologist and researcher for more than 20 years. She said the disease, which disproportionately affects minorities and the poor who are affected greatly by health disparities and often have little to no access to treatment, is surrounded by a stigma.

“HIV has become associated with groups that are marginalized in our society: Homosexuals, drug users, sex workers,” she said. “Stigma is a huge thing, even in this country.”

Molly Bail, founder and director of Springs of Hope Kenya, said that stigma is especially tough to overcome in that region due to deep, cultural beliefs.

“I have witnessed children dying and people suffering because of the lack of education and fearing stigma of their own families and the communities they live in,” Bail said. “I want them to know this disease is not a death sentence.”

Chenneville, who has worked with children and adolescents in the U.S. who were born with HIV or contracted it through sex or drug use, said disclosure is a big issue due to fear.

“There are still a lot of misperceptions about HIV,” she said. “The stigma acts as a barrier to prevention, testing and treatment everywhere.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 1.2 million people over age 13 in the United States are living with HIV, and nearly 1 in 8 are unaware of their infection. The World Health Organization (WHO) also reported that more than two million people became infected with HIV in 2014 globally. An estimated 50,000 people are infected in the United States annually with 1 in 4 estimated to be between the ages of 13-24.

“We’ve made great strides and medical advances have been fantastic, but we still have far to go in changing perceptions and promoting disclosure,” she said.

In April, Chenneville was awarded a USF System Women in Leadership & Philanthropy Faculty Research Award for her significant research in the field of HIV research and her focus on female youths in particular.
Back row: Molly Bail, wearing tan, is the founder and director of Springs of Hope Kenya. Her hope is to change perceptions about the disease by replacing fear with education and knowledge. Photo credit: Springs of Hope Kenya.