In South Africa they have a saying: Ubuntu or ‘I am because we are,’ senior nursing student Jhennelle Lee remembers from her clinical education abroad semester in Cape Town. “It says that you are the person you are because of all the people you encountered and all the experiences you’ve had.”

This resonates with Lee. As an African American woman from Bridgeport, she dedicates her nursing career to providing care for other underserved populations. Volunteering at local soup kitchens and homeless shelters through high school, Lee was struck by the condition of their skin, teeth, and overall health, which motivated her to pursue the healthcare profession. With supporting her parents and two younger siblings in mind, Lee initially strove to become a physician. However, after shadowing both physicians and nurses at Bridgeport Hospital, she found herself gravitating more to the nurses, which she described as “inspirational” and “life changing.”

Fearing to disappoint her parents, however, Lee joined UConn’s pre-medical program. Her advisor Joanna Rivera Davis in the Center for Academic Programs and the School of Nursing’s Alumni and Community Relations Coordinator Kathe Gable encouraged her to take her career into her own hands, which guided her back to nursing.

Throughout her college career, Lee has continued to support her community as a past social justice resident advisor and a volunteer in Students Transitioning to Age Appropriate Routes. Her involvement in the Student Nurses Association was pivotal, providing her with the opportunity to volunteer at their Willimantic soup kitchen clinic, treating individuals who couldn’t afford healthcare. Working alongside a physician, pharmacy students, and other nursing students, Lee took her clients’ vitals and providing basic checkups, as well as simply listening to their stories. When her courses would become difficult and stressful, returning to this clinic every other week reinforces her decision to pursue nursing, motivates her to continue, and reminds her of how fortunate she is to have the opportunities she has had.

As an Urban Service Track scholar and member of the Northern Connecticut Black Nurses Association, Lee believes diversity within the nursing profession to be crucial. With both organizations focused on cultural competency, Lee tries to exposing herself to patients of many cultures while encouraging a more diverse nurse workforce.

Under the direction of the Student Support Services and the Learning Community program, Lee had the opportunity to do her clinical rotations in hospitals and clinics in Tafelsig, Cape Town, South Africa. With over 400 residents relying on the care of one clinic, this clinical site reaffirmed in Lee the importance of health care and the necessity for providing health care to those who cannot afford it.

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Jhennelle Lee - Making Powerful Connections

Graduating next May, Lee plans to build her credentials working in the ICU for a few years, return to school to earn her DNP as a nurse anesthetist, and eventually open up her own free clinic for the underserved of Bridgeport. Reflecting on all of the people and experiences that have shaped her, she is eternally grateful for the homeless man in Bridgeport who shared his story with her, to her patients at the Willimantic shelter, to her countless advisors and mentors from UConn and healthcare, and especially to her family and their endless support.

“I wouldn’t be who I am if I didn’t have those connections,” Lee says.