

Remembering Dr. Paul Farmer By Dr. Nick Cuneo, CPHHR faculty member

Like so many in my generation, my path to medicine and global health was profoundly shaped by Paul Farmer. His idea was simple and revolutionary: every individual has value and deserves full realization of their human rights, including access to the highest standards of health care. “*Tout moun se moun*” – every person is a human being – as the Haitian proverb goes. A “preferential option for the poor” became the gospel that drove [Partners In Health \(PIH\)](#), the celebrated organization Paul co-founded, to stretch and redefine the boundaries of global health, upending the cost-effectiveness framework that had dominated public health for so many years. No longer was HIV treatment, computed tomography, intensive care, or chemotherapy beyond reach in the poorest, most remote stretches of the world. Gone was the notion that multi-drug resistant tuberculosis was not worth tackling. In fiercely advocating for access to lifesaving interventions for individuals and communities who had long been excluded from them, Paul prevailed over at times strident criticism from defenders of the status quo.

“Can you really have public health without human rights?” Paul asked, just after announcing that I’d be joining the Center for Public Health and Human Rights at my graduation from the global health equity residency program he inspired. “And, conversely, can you have human rights without any measure of public health?” Paul never let pass an opportunity to teach and he leaves behind a legacy of prolific scholarship, which includes hundreds of articles and a dozen books which have helped to reframe the discourse on global health delivery through the language of social medicine and human rights.

I feel eternally grateful to have had the opportunity to know the man who inspired me so deeply, and proudly count myself as one of the thousands of individuals he actively mentored over the years. If there is any comfort to be drawn at this time of extraordinary grief personally and for our field, it is that Paul has left behind an army of students to carry on his work across the globe. “The constitution of a revolutionary community is defined as a series of nodes,” Paul told me in a [recent conversation](#) we had with his mentor, Dr. Arthur Kleinman. “It could happen anywhere, and we hope it does.” Always the anthropologist, Paul had a supernatural ability to connect with people, to make them feel seen and inspire them to join him in the indefatigable march toward global health equity that he championed so visibly.

And now we must mourn Paul at a time when the world needs him more than ever. Alongside the loss and sadness, I feel humbled and moved by the example he showed us of what can be achieved when we allow love, not limits, to shape our commitment to human rights.