

Bryon Backenson C'90 -- Achievement in the Sciences

With the emergence of COVID-19, epidemiology has become a national fascination. But in 1989, discussion of epidemiology was rare. Bryon Backenson, a junior biology major, spent spring break visiting graduate ecology programs at several universities, but Professor Linda Van Blerkom's spring semester medical anthropology class introduced Bryon to epidemiology—and he was hooked.

He attended the School of Public Health at the University at Albany because of its partnership with the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) which provided internships and experience in the practical (as opposed to academic) side of public health.

Working on tracking the spread of Lyme disease in ticks and wildlife for NYSDOH, he experienced vector-borne diseases and moved on to working on basic pathology of the bacteria that causes Lyme disease, discovering an emerging relapsing fever pathogen in Spain, developing novel statewide surveillance systems to collect and test ticks for several pathogens and streamline the reporting of human cases of Lyme disease.

He authored the national Lyme disease surveillance case definition and sits on several panels that advise the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on issues regarding tick and mosquito-borne diseases.

In 2009, coinciding with the discovery of H1N1 pandemic influenza in New York, his role at NYSDOH expanded to cover investigation of all communicable diseases and their outbreaks in the state. He coordinated efforts to respond to H1N1, Ebola, Zika, vaping illnesses and novel coronavirus.

The part of epidemiology and public health he enjoys most is communication—the teaching and translating of data and principles. He often speaks with the media and gives numerous seminars.

Backenson has been an assistant professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Albany since 2005, teaching Infectious Disease Epidemiology. He lives in Clifton Park, NY with his wife, and his fantasy baseball league that started with classmates at Drew in 1988 is still going strong in its 34th year!