

UNC Health Southeastern emergency medicine resident featured on 'Survivor'

Amanda Crabtree
For The Robesonian

LUMBERTON — UNC Health Southeastern Emergency Medicine Resident Sarah Spelsberg, MD, participated on a medical team that was featured on the Oct. 8 episode of CBS's Survivor, episode three of Season 49.

Dr. Spelsberg worked on a team of three physicians and five advanced critical care paramedics for the program and was shown providing medical assistance to a contestant who had been bitten by a venomous snake. While the bite ended up being what is known as a "dry bite," the contestant ultimately had to leave the overall competition in order to recover from the trauma of the incident and restore his overall health.

According to Dr. Spelsberg, Survivor is filmed in very remote areas with limited access to tertiary care, so it is the very definition of wilderness and extreme medicine. Stingray, jellyfish and other injuries, like that shown on the Oct. 8 episode for a snake bite, are potential causes for medical care.

"Dengue fever and other tropical diseases are also of great interest to me," said Dr. Spelsberg. "I loved my work out in the Aleutian Islands prior to medical school which

included a lot of multidisciplinary medevac coordination and improvised field care. I teach courses on improvised field medicine. I believe adaptability and creativity are some of the most valuable assets for emergency medicine providers."

Dr. Spelsberg has done television work before this most recent project.

"Before medical school, I worked as a physician assistant in the Aleutian Islands in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, where they film Deadliest Catch," said Dr. Spelsberg. "Out there, I was occasionally involved in caring for people on film, stabilizing and medevac'ing them as well as advising them from the shore on acute issues. I still provide ship to shore medical support for some of the crew on one of the Deadliest Catch fleet fishing vessels because we became close friends and we have a mutual trust."

She got involved with the Survivor program through her work with World Extreme Medicine, also known as WEM.

"Years ago, I made a friend while travelling, Mark Hanaford, who is one of the founders of World Extreme Medicine," she said. "I believed in their mission to provide experiential wilderness and extreme medicine



Spelsberg

training and did a lot of volunteer speaking and education over the years."

Dr. Spelsberg is the director of United States operations, faculty and podcast host for World Extreme Medicine. This means she coordinates some expedition medicine-based courses for them in the US. WEM provides wilderness and extreme medicine-based CME category one and FAWM credit education all over the world, including Costa Rica, Namibia, Norway, UK, US, Australia, etc. WEM also provides medical support for films like the Mission Impossible franchise and television shows like Survivor and Shantaram.

"Last year, they asked if I could staff Survivor, but the project conflicted with some upcoming milestones in my family and personal life, so I said I could not but this year,

we made it happen," said Dr. Spelsberg. "I am grateful to my friends and colleagues at UNC Health Southeastern for making this happen for me so I could be gone for three months."

Dr. Spelsberg's educational and medical training and background began as an EMT/medic on the San Miguel Search and Rescue Team in Colorado for ten years. After that, she went to physician assistant school and has worked in emergency medicine in Florida, California and Alaska as well as orthopedic surgery at Mayo Clinic in Florida, where she holds the rank of assistant professor.

"I wanted a career I could take globally, so I went to medical school in my forties, and now I am in my final year of emergency medicine residency so I can become board certified in my specialty area," said Dr. Spelsberg.

She plans to continue these types of projects, saying, "I love wilderness medicine and I love storytelling. This provides both. I am the Expedition Medicine Column Editor for Wilderness Medicine Magazine, and I am writing a book. The people who create and produce the Survivor television series are some of the most incredible people I have ever met. I wish every company, state, country, etc. was run

with the efficiency and kindness that they deploy every day. They also do a phenomenal amount of good for every community they visit and it is very rewarding to participate in that in a meaningful way. I would love to do it again. I hope I can make it work."

Dr. Spelsberg is extremely appreciative of the support from UNC Health Southeastern, including CEO Chris Ellington, EM Residency Program Director Brianna Crosby, M.D., Emergency Services Medical Director Garik Misener, M.D., and everyone who recognized that this was an opportunity that would enrich her career, which included a leave of absence.

"At UNC Health Southeastern, they really want us to be the best versions of ourselves and cultivate the most meaningful careers, and the faculty routinely goes above and beyond to make that happen," said Dr. Spelsberg. "This experience was a dream come true for me. I am so grateful to everyone who cared enough to make it happen."

Survivor Season 49, which began Sept. 24, airs every Wednesday on CBS and airs the following day on Paramount Plus.

Amanda L. Crabtree is the director of marketing & public relations at UNC Health Southeastern. Reach her by email at amanda.crabtree@unchealth.unc.edu.

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