The Global Health Interest Group (GHIG), from the James H. Quillen College of Medicine, began a multi-section training program with the College of Public Health at ETSU’s Valleybrook Field Station. For the first part of the training, the group participated in a “Tortilla Experience.”

The “Tortilla Experience” was designed by the College of Public Health, as a part of its Project EARTH, which introduces students to some of the challenges faced by people living in low-resource areas. To complete the experience, the students have to work together to complete all of the tasks associated with creating a food item in the developing world—including clearing and plowing a small plot of land; building a protective fence using branches and home-made rope; grinding the corn with hand-operated grinders; making a stove with home-made bricks; making a field hand-washing station; and; finally, cooking and eating the tortilla. In addition to introducing the students to a range of skills that are outside their normal day-to-day lives, the “Tortilla Experience” is designed to challenge the students to work together and to think creatively about the best way to address the many challenges that they faced throughout the day.

Sarah Conway and Elizabeth Jackson, both second year medical students, are the co-Presidents of the Global Health Interest Group. Elizabeth said: “The Tortilla Experience provided the members of our club a chance to work together and experience how hard it is for some people in the world to get food. It was a reminder of some of the challenges that medical personnel will face when working in an area with limited resources.”

Sarah added: “The Tortilla Experience was a humbling reminder of the struggles that many people face globally every day, even to do something as seemingly simple as make a tortilla, and how these struggles have the potential to impact health.” She also pointed out “The exercise was a great way to consider these issues and develop team building along the way.”

Dr. Mike Stoots, Associate Professor of Community and Behavioral Health in the College of Public Health, who is the college coordinator for Valleybrook activities said “The purpose of the “Tortilla Experience” is to help students better appreciate the challenges that people face in the developing world, but to also appreciate the incredible range of skills that those people have to have in order to live successfully. Perhaps more than anything else, the “Tortilla Experience” forces students to work together to identify their own skills that allow them to solve many of these same challenges.”
GHIG will meet several more times with the College of Public Health—first to be certified in wilderness and remote first aid, and then to complete a “Refugee Experience” which will expose them to some of the challenges associated with dealing with people who are displaced by man-made or natural disasters. Dr. Stoots was assisted in teaching the “Tortilla Experience” by fellow faculty members Aimee Rowe and Randy Wykoff, and by students Beth O’Connell, Kristy Turner, and Felicia Williams. The GHIG is largely composed of first and second year medical students who have a background, or interest in working in a global or low-resource setting.