

SILHOUETTES

BY TIFFANY RAZZANO

Dr. Lucy Guerra, the newest division director of general internal medicine at the University of South Florida's Morsani Center, has always looked to her father, who is also a physician, as inspiration for her career. Much

Guerra said. "My sister and I didn't know any better because we were little."

Still, her father's goal was to help people, she said. So they stayed.

"People would pay him sometimes in corn, bartering

She eventually settled on a specialization: internal medicine.

"With internal medicine, there's something very comprehensive in the approach to medicine," she said. "It would allow me the chance, if I specialized in that, to complete my residency working with people and allow me to think of everything from medical conditions to socioeconomic conditions to everything in between that would influence their health."

After four years of medical school, she completed her first of residency at what is now the Cornell Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. It was part of a joint program with the University of Wisconsin, so she also spent time as a resident at a major medical center in Madison.

"The idea was if you're going to be an internist and practice primary care as well as do hospital work, this would give you the best of both worlds," Guerra said.

Because she was able to attend medical school on a National Healthcare Service Corps scholarship, she was obliged to work for them in underserved communities for several years.

"It was essentially similar to Peace Corps, but for people who want to go to medical school," she said.

Between 2000 and 2004, she worked for eight different community health centers in the Tampa Bay area and Fort Meyers, working with migrant workers, those infected with HIV, and the homeless. She requested this region in Florida because her husband, a geriatric specialist, had taken a job in Plant City. But she could be sent "wherever was the greatest need."

She added, "I felt I was very fortunate. I had an opportunity to work in a lot of different settings and it gave me an idea of the struggle people have to access healthcare - whether it's because of culture, education or whatever - it kind of gave me insight into that."

When her service obligation was completed, she knew she wanted to continue to help the underserved as well as young doctors. She briefly worked for Suncoast Community Health Centers in Ruskin between 2004 and 2006, and began teaching at USF as an assistant clinical professor at the same time.

Then in 2006, she took a job with Moffitt Cancer Center as an academic hospitalist. She had become familiar with Moffitt's work in the community during her time with the National Healthcare Service Corps.

"I just remember when I was looking around that I wanted to work with the underserved and also wanted to do something academ-

ic," she said. "I was able to teach medical students and residents, but Moffitt also does great work in the community. So I was able to see patients who otherwise don't have access to care."

In 2007, Guerra assisted four USF medical students in creating the Bridge Healthcare Clinic, a free clinic that would provide healthcare access to anyone. The clinic was very much in line with her ideals and she wanted to help these students turn it into a reality.

"They were just thrilled that someone believed they could do something that would work," she said.

She recalled the evening the clinic opened, operating after hours starting at 6 p.m.

"There was a line of patients outside the door and it reminded me of all the migrant workers I'd worked with," she said. "I just thought, 'My God, all these people.'"

She added, "Today it's an integral part of what USF does to pay back the community in this area. It's in essentially Suitcase City."

Two years ago, the volunteer-run clinic moved from

a Department of Health office on Fletcher Avenue to the Morsani Center on USF's campus.

Guerra also spent the last two years at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital working with medical students. She moved there because it gave her more of an opportunity to teach.

"I've pretty much worked in the three main teaching facilities for USF as an affiliate or full-time over the past 10 years," she said.

This spring she was offered the position of division director of general internal medicine at USF's Morsani Center. She's stepping up to the plate to take over for someone who held the position for 22 years. She'll still see a few patients at the VA, but her primary duties will now be at USF.

She sees it as her "social responsibility" to guide new doctors.

"I think if you can share your experiences with them and maybe help them to gain some understanding to patients to have better access to care, then you've made the next generation of doctors a better generation," she said.

Dr. Lucy Guerra



"Talk about the American dream. My parents lived it. Those things really influence you."

Photo by Robert Azmitia

like him, she's focused on providing medical access to the less fortunate and underserved sectors of society.

Born in New York City, Guerra is a first generation Cuban-American. Her parents came to the United States as Cuban refugees around 1960.

In Cuba, her father was a doctor. But in America, he was forced to work as a janitor. Neither of her parents spoke English when they initially moved to New York.

During her early years, "Spanglish" was commonly spoken around their home. But, "I always remember my parents struggling to learn [English] to the point where people could really understand them," she said.

When he learned to speak English well enough, her father passed the medical boards and had to undergo his medical training all over again. He was in his early forties by the time he finished.

"Once he was a licensed physician, he looked for where he could work where he could help others," Guerra said.

So he took a job with a program designed to bring foreign physicians to underserved areas of the country. He moved his wife and two young daughters to the Midwest when Guerra was 5 years old. They landed in a small Kansas town, an isolated farming community of about 2,000 residents, many of them Mennonites and migrant workers.

"It was really like a cul-

other things and he didn't care," she said. "He felt he was helping someone. Talk about the American dream. My parents lived it."

She added, "Those things really influence you whether you're conscious of it or not at the time. I'll always remember those days."

By the time she was 11, her parents decided their daughters needed a better education and also to experience something other than small-town life. So they moved to Miami, where both her mother and father had extended family.

Guerra graduated from high school in 1987 and attended Amherst College in Massachusetts. She graduated with a B.A. in American Studies in 1991.

Before applying to medical school, she headed back to Miami. Between 1991 and 1992, she earned a master's degree in public health from the University of Miami. At the same time, she worked as a researcher in an oncology lab.

In 1993, she entered medical school at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. This had special significance for Guerra because her father had worked there as a janitor.

"I always remember as a medical student there walking into the hospital where we had lectures and I always thought, 'My father probably mopped these floors,'" she said. "I always had that thought whenever it got tough. It sounds hokey, but it served as inspiration to be

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