

Jessica's Story

By José E. Rodríguez MD & Jessica K. Ramos

Jessica's story.....

Jessica always had headaches; she never complained about them, but she stated that was one of the reasons that she was interested in Neurology. Even with that interest, she came to my family practice every Monday full of energy, anxiously waiting the opportunity to interact and learn with more patients. Although I was teaching extensively at the medical school at that time, I never had Jessica in a formal classroom setting. It was always in the clinic, where we would speak after every patient encounter, and we would work on presentations together.

Jessica selected my site for a first year preceptor program, "Primary care with a focus on urban and Latino health." Being Latina, she was interested in providing care in that population. She was also fluent in Spanish, and was doing very well in medical school. Before she came to my clinic on the first day of the rotation, I had not met her.

Jessica appeared on television with me once. Bronx 12, a local cable news channel was doing a story on obesity. Since we were running free group visits for obesity treatment out of the health center at Tremont, we were selected to speak to the public on the subject. The reporter interviewed our patients, and Jessica translated. Some footage of us consulting on patients was included in the report. To this day it is one of more precious memories of our time with Jessica. While I worked hard to make the experience a good one for her, I never understood how much it meant until I read her final reflection. Now, months after her passing, it is more meaningful than ever.

When presented with the opportunity to work with patients during my first year in medical school, I was exhilarated to make a reality what I had imagined being a doctor was like. I had worked in an emergency room before and disliked the quick, impersonal interaction between patient and doctor that substituted for the real connection that should

be made. I had idealized what kind of a doctor I would like to become because I had seen from the patient's perspective the doctor, [like]...the doctor who lacked compassion when telling me that my grandfather had cancer. I had numerous encounters with doctors that would have left me with the impression that this profession somehow only draws the callous, who are interested in the disease and not in treating the person suffering from the disease. However, my memory of my pediatrician, Dr. Simpson-Savory, who was always kind and always listening remained. I have not seen her in the last sixteen years, but the sensation of her cold, long, smooth hands on my back while listening to me breathe or checking if I had scoliosis almost blocks out the memories of having to wait two months for an appointment. But with this range of memories, I was hopeful that my preceptor would have similar ideals and would truly serve as a role model instead of another example of how I did not want to practice.

Choosing Urban and Latino Health was the easiest decision because it felt natural to work in the community that I was from. My parents' first language is Spanish and even now, thirty-five years after they immigrated to this country, their preference is to speak Spanish in and out of the home. My mother chose her doctor based on the fact that he speaks Spanish [and] he is from the same country....

Growing up in a Spanish-speaking household, I always understood that language is a strong bond and that there is a certain camaraderie that comes inherently by speaking the same language.... The ability to express yourself [is] critical when speaking to a doctor and [speaking] in your own language is one less obstacle when in pain.

I chose the Health Center at Tremont. It is a clinic that seems to be always full of patients. The majority of the patients are Spanish speaking and...use Medicaid. Working in this environment where there are a lack of amenities....reinforces the purpose of [our] profession, which is to serve your patients. [A] clinic does not need to be beautifully decorated in mahogany and marble in order to treat...patients. However, in order for this clinic to function, at least some of this staff has to be able to speak Spanish.

Working with [my preceptor] has been a blessing because he has functioned as a true role model. I have been continually impressed with my preceptor's ability to give of himself to his patients so that they feel comfortable with sharing their intimacies so that he can aid them while not sacrificing his privacy...

[During the last year] I have been able to become more comfortable in talking to patients. I am able to truly talk to them instead of interrogating them regarding their condition. I now walk into the examining room not having seen their chart and am able to get a complete history. I am also better able to give case presentations. Incorporating humor and lightness into some of my interviews makes it more pleasing for me and for the patient while still getting all the important information I need to get.... I hope that when I am practicing, I am able to work in a setting in which I provide the most benefit to this [the Latino] community. There are not many more rewarding experiences than helping someone who truly needs it and is grateful for it.

It has been about a year since Jessica passed away. She was diagnosed with a malignant neuroblastoma a few months after she wrote this piece and was forced to leave medical school for intense treatment. I also left the Bronx and started in a new academic career at Florida State University College of Medicine. Jessica would occasionally write to me, and tell me how things were going. I can remember her telling me about her illness, and how her tumor was inoperable. Yet, in spite of it all she seemed upbeat about her treatment, saying that the radiation was a blessing because it was shrinking her tumor.

As I look back on our time together, I was fortunate that she was in my office working with me for about 5 hours a week for one academic year. During that time we became both friends and colleagues. We discussed patients, learned and laughed together, and we made a difference. Jessica actually presented a poster with me at a national conference, where she was able to meet and learn from other Latino physicians.

The tragedy of her death has been cause for many of her teachers to reflect—on life, on relationships and on hope. I have spoken with them as I searched for a way to pay tribute to such a young, vibrant, and intelligent student.

Because we came from the educational model of “see one, do one, teach one,” we are constantly exposed to learners. They enrich our lives with their experiences, and we in turn attempt to enrich theirs by expanding their education. With

so many learners in our lives, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them individually. Yet, Jessica reminds us that they are individuals, that their stories are meaningful, and that above all, it is a rare privilege to teach something so intimate and private to the next generation, and to trust them as they will use their knowledge to help us in the future. It is this relationship that made Jessica's story so special, so essential to be told. Although it might be too idealistic, we must always remember that it is these

relationships that make the difference—that bridge us with the future, and the hope for a better tomorrow.

When I read her essay, it fills me with sadness at our (her family's and medicine's) loss—She was a blessing to the patients that we served, as well as everyone around her. I am filled with regret as I realize that I could have done more for her in life. Her essay speaks of the highest values in medicine, of caring, of giving, of sharing, of making a difference in the lives of those less fortunate. During times of frustration, I often look at this essay, and find meaning in it beyond its words. It reminds me of why I teach, and the difference that anyone can make in the life of a patient or a learner. It is my hope to immortalize her in these words, so that all can remember why we sacrifice so much for people that we barely know. I only wish that Jessica was here to share it with us.

