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'90 Alum establishes The Miguel and Carolina Hernandez Memorial Endowment



The story of Dag Zapatero's (DDS, 1990) journey to the United States from Cuba in the 1960s reads like an imaginary tale.

His exile from Cuba began when his grandparents, Miguel and Carolina Hernandez, brokered a deal with communist leaders in 1965 to gain safe passage of 13 family members out of Cuba. One of those family members was an uncle imprisoned by the communist government because of his political views. The story now continues with Zapatero's realization of his American dream 35 years later.

In January, Dr. Zapatero announced the establishment of the Miguel and Carolina Hernandez Memorial Endowment with a pledge to the Dental Foundation of North Carolina in memory of his grandparents. Miguel Hernandez was a Cuban businessman, whose success was vilified by the new communist government who had taken power in Cuba. His grandmother Carolina was the principal influence in this life. The first Hernandez Scholarship will be awarded for the first time this fall. It will provide a yearly stipend of at least \$1,000 to a DDS or dental hygiene student at the UNC School of Dentistry who is of Hispanic decent or a resident of Virginia.

"I established this endowment to keep the memory of my grandparents alive and to express my gratitude for their unselfish sacrifice," said Zapatero. "The joy and success I take pleasure in today is because of their desire to see their family grow up in a free society. My hope is that the scholarship provides Hispanic students a little encouragement and support necessary to become successful dental professionals."

Zapatero's story is similar to the stories of other first-generation immigrants who came to the U.S. in search of a brighter future. Today, Dr. Zapatero practices general dentistry from his solo practice in Virginia Beach, VA, a far cry from his immigrant roots in Madrid, Spain and subsequently on the southern shores of Long Island, NY.

In the years immediately following their arrival in America, Zapatero

recalls sharing a house with 14 family members and helping his parents develop a family business out of their home. "My mother started working door-to-door with sales to other Hispanic families she'd discovered in the white pages of our local phonebook, and eventually the business evolved into Maria's Boutique, a small department store," said Zapatero. "It was always understood that everyone in the family would chip in and help out. I started helping out at the store at the age of 10."

As the first Hernandez grandchild to graduate from a U.S. college, Zapatero believes that the biggest lesson he has learned from his life experiences is the importance of education. As a dental student Zapatero was introduced to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), which encourages dentists to improve the quality of comprehensive dental care to patients through continuing dental education. This summer Zapatero will receive his mastership from the AGD in Anaheim, CA.

"My family always stressed education and hard work," said Zapatero. "They knew education was my ticket to a better life. I grew up fully believing that achieving the American dream was possible, and it really motivated me to work hard and excel. I also think that the best part about reaching that success is being able to give back. With the rising cost of dental education, the endowment is a wonderful way to encourage Hispanic students interested in the profession, while honoring the memory of my grandparents."

The idea for the Hernandez Endowment took several years to become a reality, but Zapatero is delighted that it will soon start providing financial assistance to School of Dentistry students. Zapatero has also invited family and friends to contribute to the fund in hopes that additional gifts will provide a larger award or make it possible to present more than one scholarship each year.

"Carolina has greatly impacted my life in a positive way," said Zapatero. "The curriculum and training at the School of Dentistry gives its graduates an advantage in the practice. I am proud to be a graduate from the School of Dentistry and happy to help support students while providing a legacy for my grandparents and family."

Last modified: by Almond on 5/27