

Homegrown Doctors Value Medical Education In the Valley

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For Rene and Veronica Ramirez careers in medicine were always a dream. But with childhoods spent in rural California – Dinuba and Kerman – the couple’s desire to bring aid back to their communities seemed only to be just wishful thinking.



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Credit Ezra Romero / Valley Public Radio

Rene and Veronica Ramirez are two doctors in the Valley that are determined to bring quality healthcare to those that live in the region.

"I always thought I would like to be a doctor, but I didn't know if I actually could do it," she said.

That's Veronica Ramirez. She says her family helped her develop an interest in medicine early on.

"I've had medical problems in my family, my mom has epilepsy, and I have experienced that since I was very young," she said.

Veronica's future husband Rene shared a similar story growing up:

"He had a similar goal," she said. "We both came from families where no one ever has been a physician before and so we were really going through this path sort of blindly until we could find good mentors to help us get through."

The two met their freshman year at Fresno State and have stuck side by side ever since.

But with no financial backing from their families of modest means, Veronica and Rene worried that her hopes of a career in medicine would be out of reach.

That's when the Healthy Careers Opportunity Program at Fresno State came in. It helps prepare undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds for careers in medicine. Both say that without the program, which is also known by its initials HCOP, they may never have become successful doctors.

"Both of us came from families where we didn't have anyone to look to for guidance in pursuing medicine and so HCOP really became that for us," Ramirez said. "We literally in that office day in and day out and it was through that program we learned what it takes to be a good student, a good science student, because that was something very new to us."

It wasn't always easy. Kenny Banh, a mentor to the couple and an assistant clinical professor of emergency medicine at UCSF Fresno, says they pressed on no matter what life brought them, including childbirth.

"She actually had two kids during residency, one at the beginning and one at the end and she barely missed the beat, she picked right back up from work. She's actually one of the chief residents now and has excelled during her residency. They've both been shining stars in both the programs, pediatrics and emergency medicine."

The couple says they hope that by planting themselves in the Valley, they will be part of regional change of mentality - one that values education and decreases the so-called brain drain of educated professionals, especially physicians, in the area.

In fact, Rene believes that studying in the Valley brings a competitive edge.

"Fresno is kind of a hidden gem, so you say," Ramirez said. "We are an educational program that's treating a tremendous or a huge community. Often times they show up with such rare conditions that most residents or even medical students only read about in text books, but yet we experience them on a day to day encounter. So the training here is pretty awesome. A lot of our colleagues across the country graduate from programs where they still have only been able to do the procedures that I did as an intern, so to say first year resident, they are only able to do that in cadaver skills labs or they are only able to do that in simulation type of settings."

Banh says that the Ramirez's are a perfect example of how high school pipeline and college mentoring programs can impact the region.

"They are going to provide a lot to the Valley, not just because they are good doctors, but they are going to have a relation and association with patients that a lot of other doctors can't."

Today Veronica and Rene have two children and own their own home. Rene is a resident with the University of California, San Francisco's Fresno campus and Veronica is a pediatrician in Fresno.

But as successful as the Ramirez's have been, the sprawling gap in the Valley's doctor to patient ratio cannot be filled by them alone.