

Jon Gilbert Fox



FOR ADRIANNA STANLEY MEDICINE IS ABOUT CULTURE AND FAMILY

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ONE OF THE MOST POIGNANT AND ENDURING IMAGES from Adrianna Stanley’s trip to Guatemala—as the youngest member of a medical team providing cleft lip and cleft palate surgeries to underserved children in Guatemala City—is that of a frightened and overwhelmed 13-year old patient.

“My heart just sunk when I saw her,” recalls Stanley (‘18), a second-year medical student at Geisel School of Medicine and a member of Geisel’s Global Health Scholars program. “In that culture, and in many others, having a cleft lip or cleft palate is very socially stigmatizing. This girl had never been let out of her home and had never had the chance to interact with anyone. I hope now she’ll have the opportunity to grow, to socialize, and live a happier and more normal life.”

Most of the 41 surgeries completed over the weeklong trip last April (Stanley’s first year of medical school) were done on much younger patients, “to give them the capacity to develop their speech normally, go to school without ridicule, grow up with confidence, and bring the option of a better life to their families,” she explains.

Traveling with Free to Smile, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing surgical and dental services to poor and underprivileged children throughout the world, Stanley was guided and mentored by Dartmouth alumnus Frank Virnelli (D’60, Med’61), a retired plastic surgeon and global health veteran.

While in Guatemala, she gained experience in a wide variety of clinical activities—including administration, nursing, dentistry, anesthesia, and surgery. “With her thoughtful understanding of the culture and bilingual language abilities, she was an essential member of the team,” says Lisa Adams (Med’90), associate dean for Global Health and director of Geisel’s Center for Health Equity, who facilitated the connection between Stanley and Virnelli.

“One of the best parts of the experience was being able to interact with the patients and connect with the families,” says Stanley. “Seeing all of their fear and anxiety be replaced with smiles and tears of joy when they were reunited with their children after surgery, and receiving their many hugs of gratitude, are memories that are very precious to me.”

Stanley’s interest in global health is deeply rooted in her culture and family. Growing up in San José, CA, listening to her grandfather’s stories about growing up in the slums of San José, Costa Rica, overcoming poverty and hardship and successfully immigrating his family to the U.S. in the 1960s, inspired her to want to give back to the Latino community. And watching her mother live with symptoms of cysticercosis, a chronic infectious disease caused by a parasite she picked up as a child living in Costa Rica, fueled a desire to learn about tropical diseases.

“I chose Dartmouth because I wanted a small community with a comfortable and cohesive learning environment, and I also wanted a place where I could pursue my passions,” says Stanley, who along with Geisel second-year classmate Fernando Vazquez (‘18), started the Dartmouth Chapter of the Latino Medical Student Association—a non-profit organization founded to represent, support, educate, and unify U.S. Latino medical students.

“Adrianna arrived at Geisel with an established, focused, and genuine desire to work with underserved populations in Latin America,” says Adams. “She has already spent much time in Central America, especially Costa Rica, to address health inequities in that region, and now is acquiring the skills to have a deeper impact. She serves as an outstanding role model for young women in these communities.”

“I’m so grateful to have a mentor like Dr. Adams, and I feel lucky to be at Dartmouth, which is at the forefront of global health efforts,” says Stanley. “To have these opportunities as a pre-clinical medical student is amazing. I wouldn’t be able to do this anywhere else.”

TIM DEAN