



INSIGHTS

Favorite song:

I like music a lot and I like Bruce Springsteen quite a bit. I followed Bruce's careers from when he was just coming up and I watched it flourish.

Memorable Bronx moment:

The creation of the United Health Plan. It was the realization of my father's dream and I am really happy to have helped make it come true.

What inspires me:

It really is about just helping people. I'm a hard worker and helping people is what drives me. I take pride in that.

Paloma Hernandez

Providing healthcare is a family legacy

BY JON MINNERS

Paloma Izquierdo-Hernandez is a woman with a mission – a mission to provide affordable, comprehensive, and high quality primary and specialty medical care to continuously improve the health status of underserved communities in the Bronx.

Hernandez is succeeding in this mission through the ongoing efforts of the Urban Health Plan, an organization with over 30 years of service; an organization created by her father – Dr. Richard Izquierdo. Through Hernandez's efforts, she has helped to make UHP the premier community health center in the country.

"My father was inspired by a need to make sure people in the south Bronx did not have to access health care in an emergency room," Hernandez said. "My dad is an amazing physician and I always saw him as being committed to the community and passionate in serving his patients. His work inspired me to continue in his footsteps in the same way."

Hernandez has done just that, achieving great success as the president and CEO of Urban Health Plan. Led by her efforts, UHP has grown from a one-site facility to a network of federally qualified community health centers that includes four sites, five school health programs, four part-time sites at facilities for at-risk populations, a growing WIC program and multiple other grant-funded programs. And UHP is fully accredited by the Joint Commission. But Hernandez doesn't look at these accomplishments to determine her success – she sees it in the community she has called home for most of her life.

"I encounter people we help every day," she explained. "I have been around patients all my life. They will recognize me on the street and stop me just to say thank you. That is what makes everything worthwhile."

Hernandez first came to the borough when she was three years old, having been born in Switzerland while her father was enrolled at the University of Lausanne Medical School. Hernandez came to the Bronx and lived on White Plains Road and Watson Avenue. At this time, her father was becoming a thriving physician; at times the only doctor

in the community. An icon in the neighborhood, Dr. Izquierdo used his influence and became a strong community activist, serving as a chairman of the Hunts Point Community Committee and the 41st Precinct Community Council while also fighting to keep St. Francis Hospital open.

Although unsuccessful in his attempts to keep the hospital open, Dr. Izquierdo and his fellow activists led the City to purchase and convert the property to what today is known as the Segundo Ruiz Belvis Neighbor-

hood Family Health Center, one of New York's Health and Hospitals sites where thousands of south Bronx residents receive medical care. And in 1967, for \$3,000, he purchased an empty building on Southern Boulevard and Westchester Avenue and created the San Juan Health Center, which was in operation until 1974 when it became Urban Health Plan, a federally-qualified community health center licensed by New York State.

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Hernandez, who received her undergraduate degree from Boston College and holds masters degrees from Teachers College, Columbia University and the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, worked side-by-side with her father in helping to make UHP a beacon in the community.

"We professionally grew up together," she said. "And what Urban Health Plan has done for this community is a realization of my father's dream and it makes me happy to know that I helped it come true." In continuing to speak with her father, Hernandez notes that Dr. Izquierdo has expressed his pride in his daughter's efforts. And he has reason to be proud.

Last year, Urban Health Plan served more than 31,000 individuals. Its asthma management program received the National Exemplary Award by the United States Envi-

ronmental Protection Agency in 2006 for the work it has done in reducing asthma-related hospitalization rates in the south Bronx. In July of 2009, UHP was named one of the top 20 community health centers in the country by the Human Resources and Services Administration.

"It is great to know that we are able to make an impact on so many people in such a positive way," said Hernandez, who keeps ahead of the latest health care trends by serving on a number of boards, including the NYC

Primary Care Development Corporation, the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Advisory Council, the Community Health Care Association of NYS, The Joint Commission Ambulatory Care Advisory Council and Affinity Health Plan.

She has also served as a member to the NYC Commission for Economic Opportunity, an appointed task force led by the Bloomberg administration that developed innovative anti-poverty approaches in New York City. On that end, one such initiative is the creation of jobs.

Over 500 people are employed at UHP. "Healthcare is one of the industries that continue to thrive, even in a bad economy," she said. "And as we grow, we can offer more opportunities for a community looking for work."

On that end, Hernandez and her father have worked to create the Dr. Richard Izquierdo Health and Science Charter School, which opened its doors to 100 sixth graders in fall 2010. The school, which will grow to 700 students in grades 6-12, is the first such institution to offer a career and technical education program geared specifically towards preparing students for jobs in the health care sector and included Emergency Medical Technician

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Paloma Hernandez

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The school has partnered with UHP, which will provide professional development to enhance the health and science curriculum and create an effective career education model. UHP will also provide professional and academic opportunities to students through seminars, site visits, health career counseling and an internship program and summer and part-time job opportunities.

"The school will serve as a pipeline for the creation of future healthcare providers from the community," Hernandez said, also noting that one of her two daughters is a health educator at the school. "Our hope is that the school will help stop the cycle of poverty in the community."

Ending poverty, helping residents remain healthy - these are also reasons why Hernandez has gotten further involved in the community as the chairperson for the Hunts Point Economic Development Corporation, where one of the major topics of interest is working with the world's larg-

est food distribution center, which brings a multitude of jobs in the area while its trucks often contribute to the health problems in the area, including asthma.

"It's a huge industry in Hunts Point and yet, there is not much of a relationship between it and the other businesses or the residential area," she explains. "The market works on its own, as part of its own community. We are working to ensure better communication and more of a partnership with the rest of Hunts Point."

Hernandez's efforts have made her a true example of the consistent and outstanding leadership that exists in community-based organizations and she plans on continuing in her efforts to bolster the community for many years to come.

"It's been a great 30 plus years," she said of her history at UHP. "And there is still work to do. I always believe in trying to do the best for the community and the biggest motivating factor has been making a difference in people's lives here in Hunts Point. I wouldn't think of going anywhere else."

BRONX *Times*

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COMPLIMENTARY

