



Teresa Villela: Practicing True Family Medicine

The life of Teresa Villela is the realization of every immigrant family's dream.

Villela's family moved to Tucson, Arizona, from Mexico when she was 10 years old. Her father sold furniture. Her mother cleaned offices. Still, they managed to send the eldest of their five children to Yale University. Villela graduated from Yale and went on to medical school at the University of Connecticut. She now practices and teaches at UCSF in one of the top medical schools in the country.

But Villela, an associate clinical professor, is doing more than just making her family proud. She acknowledges the role affirmative action played in her education, and is determined to give back in a way that has both immediate and lasting impact. "I graduated from high school and college in the middle of the affirmative action movement. Without it, I would not have been able to become a doctor," she says.

Today, Villela is training the next generation of family physicians while helping to define a new era in family and community medicine. As director of the UCSF Family and Community Medicine Residency Program, Villela could more than fill her schedule with teaching, research and grant writing. But Villela is determined to practice what she teaches: true family medicine. "First and foremost, I want to be a family physician to the patients that I care for. Remaining clinically active is important to me. I need to stay grounded in that," she says.

Villela's story and commitment are both inspirational, said Kevin Grumbach, professor and chair of UCSF's Department of Family and Community Medicine and chief of Family and Community Medicine at San Francisco General Hospital (SFGH). "Teresa is the real thing. She exemplifies what it means to give back to the community. She is the consummate family doctor, caring for San Francisco's poor – entire families at a time, from infants to the elderly," Grumbach says.

Villela's commitment to her practice shows residents the difference they can make in the health of an individual, a family and the community beyond. "She serves as a role model and a mentor, inspiring them to devote themselves to community service," Grumbach says.

But it might surprise some of her trainees to know that Villela had only a vague interest in medicine when she arrived at Yale. "All the other kids were pre- something. So I started saying I was premed," recalls Villela, now 48. The young Villela had heard from her father that a career in medicine was something to which one should aspire. "Both of his sisters were nurses in Mexico and they married doctors. And I think my father always regretted that he didn't have the opportunity to become either a physician or a pharmacist."

Despite only a limited notion of what medicine was about, Villela stuck to her major. But it wasn't until she volunteered at a women's clinic that she felt medicine was her true calling. At 21, she was counseling poor pregnant women – in English and in Spanish – about their health and their options regarding their unplanned pregnancies. She went on to be hired by that clinic, working as a health educator for four years before going to medical school.

Villela continues to serve the medically underserved and hopes to see the day when there is universal health care in the United States. "We must work toward it and not just accept what we're given," says Villela, who is living proof of her own mantra.

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Photo by Elisabeth Fall