



ANA NATALE-PEREIRA

## Champion for the Community

Inspired by her family who emigrated from Uruguay when she was 13, this doctor, who is also the mother of three-year-old triplets and a seven-year-old son, rarely stops moving from patients to projects.

BY MARY KATE SHERIDAN

Ana Natale-Pereira was just a little girl when she became enamored with medicine. At 8 years old, she loved roaming the vast wards and visiting patients at a public hospital in Uruguay where her aunt and uncle worked. “I was just fascinated by it,” says Natale. “I felt at home.”

Natale is now a doctor of internal medicine, but she’s “not your average doctor,” says Aida Martin-Rivera, program coordinator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Grant. “She gives every patient the care they deserve, and she’s

very culturally competent. That is very hard to find.”

Her journey toward becoming a community champion began when her family immigrated to Orange from Uruguay when she was 13 years old. Life as an immigrant was not easy, and the “cultural differences were huge.” It was this “culture shock” that sparked Natale’s strong desire to help the community. “I came as an immigrant. My parents never had health insurance,” she says.

After high school, Natale enrolled in Fairleigh Dickinson University and graduat-

ed with a BS in biology in 1988. (She was the first person in her family to graduate from college.) From there, she accepted a job at UMDNJ’s Center for Molecular Medicine and Immunology (CMMI) and also began a PhD program in biology at Rutgers.

But Natale had her eye on medical school, and there was only one on her radar: NJMS, “a school that embraced diversity.” While working at CMMI, Natale met James Foster, MD, NJMS assistant dean of admissions then and Maria Soto-Greene, MD, vice-dean, who introduced her to the Hispanic Center for Excellence, a model program to which Natale is still very committed. “That summer, I put my heart and soul into that program...I wanted to prove that I was very capable and willing to do this.”

Her dreams finally fell into place—Natale was accepted into NJMS, leaving her PhD program and her job to become a full-time medical student in August 1992. Three years later, as she searched for residency programs, she once again realized that NJMS was the only place for her. “I loved what I was doing here...I was very committed to the population here and to the people,” she says. After graduating in 1996, she worked as a resident in internal medicine at NJMS until 1999, when she became chief resident.

Since medical school, Natale has been an attending physician at UH and has reached the rank of associate professor at NJMS. In 2005, she received her MPH in Urban Health Administration from UMDNJ–School of Public Health. Natale’s roles have included teaching, research, and clinical practice. She also mentors students and residents and encourages them to share in her passion for community health.

Working with the neighboring community has been a driving force in Natale’s career and something that was initially fueled by one of her early mentors, Waldemar (“Buzz”) Johanson, MD. Johanson was committed to developing “a relationship between the medical system and the community. He envisioned the type of patient-centered care that we are promoting now,” says Natale.

Johanson’s vision materialized in the form

of the FOCUS Community Health Center. Located on Broad Street in Newark, FOCUS provides medical services to the Latino community. From 2001 through 2005, Natale served as the associate medical director and then as the medical director, where she developed strong relationships with the community and her patients. Her responsibilities also included teaching and mentoring students and internal medicine residents, who had the unique experience of working in a culturally and linguistically competent environment where the patient was the center of care.

After FOCUS, Natale became the medical director of Community Based Networks in the Division of Academic Medicine, Geriatrics, and Community Programs until 2007. And in 2006, with the support and mentorship of Debbie Salas-Lopez, MD, Natale became principal investigator on the Cancer Prevention and Treatment Demonstration Project for Ethnic Minorities, a four-year, \$2.8 million grant through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Based on what they had learned at FOCUS, Natale's team developed a proposal to facilitate cancer screening and care for elderly Latinos through patient navigation. Now in their fourth and final year of the CMS grant, the team operates a patient navigation program with more than 1200 participants across multiple counties. A "community-based approach" to patient navigation, they help the Latino community overcome barriers to cancer screening. "It is about their selfless personalities, their ability to problem-solve, their advocacy, and their passion for people," Natale says describing the patient navigators.

The CMS grant has been particularly important to Natale because it is community-based. She is "very positive with her efforts in helping the community," says Connie Muñoz, a CMS patient navigator.

"Understanding people helps get them to a better position in their health. I truly believe that. If you just look at the health issue or the illness you can't help them get better. You need to focus on everything

about them—their social determinants of health are just as important," she says.

But Natale's passion isn't solely rooted in community—she has been fiercely dedicated to cancer research and prevention since her father died of lung cancer in 2000. Since then, she completed a junior faculty sabbatical with the National Cancer Institute's Redes en Acción Program and served as a principal investigator and co-investigator on various cancer-related grants. She also participated in the Cancer, Culture, and Literacy fellowship through the Moffitt Cancer Center and a Leadership Fellowship with the National Hispanic Medical Association.

It is no surprise that the inspiration for her work has been her father—Natale's most important community is her family. Her eyes sparkle as she talks about her grandmother, who worked two jobs after immigrating to America and taught Natale the importance of having a work ethic. She smiles as she describes her busy household,

which includes her 3-year-old triplets (girls), her 7-year-old son, and her husband, Gustavo, her high school sweetheart. Her free time is dedicated to her extended family, who share some of Natale's passions: they participate together in the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer walk in the fall and the Relay for Life walk in the spring.

Despite all that Natale has accomplished, she maintains strong ambitions. Among her goals are to make patient navigation a standard of care in "the healthcare experience" and "to deliver comprehensive, patient-centered care for the community, reducing health inequalities, and in the process allow students to be part of that experience."

Our interview ends, and I reach out to shake this doctor's hand. I am met instead with a warm hug. As I walk away, she flashes a bright smile, and in that moment, I see the 8-year-old girl, completely in her element and filled with determination and dreams—still. ●

## A med student walks into a bar... *Continued from page 11*

The blog also keeps me grounded in another way. When I start getting concerned emails from friends and family feeling sorry for me, I know that I am wallowing too much. Yes, med school is hard. But not only is it a choice I made; it's also an incredible privilege to be here.

Sometimes it's easier to write about the negatives. But there are many positives here too. Before each test, many of my classmates send out helpful study guides and PDFs of practice questions to the entire class. And there are those who plan awesome social events and nights out for everyone.

Although being a doctor is something I've wanted to do since high school, reading and writing have always been an enormous part of my life. Starting a blog was a selfish excuse to write whatever I wanted in a forum people might actually read (as opposed to journals I've kept which are secret, hidden files in my computer). I've always felt the need to document life, and medical school is no different.

Right now is an incredible time to be entering medicine. My class will be graduating in 2014, just as most of the provisions in the healthcare reform bill are enacted. No one knows for sure what the future will be like for doctors or for healthcare in general, but I am excited to be part of the changes and will keep track of them as they unfold. If nothing else, years from now I will be able to look back in the blog, and laugh at myself for how wrong I was about predicting my own future.

Check out <http://amedstudentwalksintoabar.blogspot.com>.