

**Perspective of Change:
The story of civil rights, diversity, inclusion and
access to education at HMS and HSDM**

Interview: Sonia Molina | August 9, 2019

JOAN ILACQUA: Great. So I'm Joan Ilacqua. Today is August 9th, 2019, and I'm on the phone with Dr. Sonia Molina. We're doing an interview for the Center for History of Medicine and Office for Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Partnership at HMS. Dr. Molina, do I have your permission to record us today?

DR. SONIA MOLINA: Yes.

JI: Excellent. So, my first question is totally background. If you could please tell me about yourself, where did you grow up?

SM: I was born in El Salvador, and I came to this country when I was 17 to Los Angeles, and I went to college in Long Beach State.

JI: Great. Did you -- what did you go to college for?

SM: The major was basically, biological science, and you know, it [would be?] classes that I needed to take to go to dental school.

JI: Any -- had you decided -- when did you decide to become a dentist?

SM: When I was in El Salvador, I was already planning on going to dental school. In El Salvador, most of the dentists are women, and I think that what makes it appealing, I remember that I lived in a little tiny town, and there was one dentist, and she had her office kind of like in the front, and in the back with her house, so you could hear her talking to the kids, you know, telling them to do their homework, you know, things like that. So I thought, oh, you know, this is great, because you can have a family and also have a career.

JJ: That's excellent. So, did you decide -- like, what brought you to the United States to study that?

SM: So, I was not planning on coming here; I had to reapply to dental school in El Salvador. In El Salvador, right after high school, you start dental school. So, I was already going to start my 11th grade, which meant -- means that you have to apply a year ahead. So I was already in the process of applying to dental school in El Salvador, but the war was very intense at the time, and so my mother was really concerned; my brother was 19, I was 17, and my sister was five, and a lot of the students were protesting and getting killed in the process, so my mother decided to bring the three of us over here. And she thought it was just going to be for a couple of years, until things kind

of settled down, but the war lasted at least 15 years. So, that didn't happen that way.

JI: And so, you all came to America. Can I ask -- so, (laughter) usually I ask, you know, what does your mother do? In part, what did your mother do when you were growing up, but also when she came to America, what did she end up doing? Was she supportive of you pursuing a career here?

SM: No, so when -- my father died when I was five, and my mother only completed high school. So it was very hard for her to do that, and my mother only completed high school. So it was very hard for her to get a job in El Salvador, and so when I was nine, she left us in the care of my grandmother, and she came here to work, and she was mainly working in cleaning houses, but more living in the house of the people that she worked for. (pause)

JI: Dr. Molina, are you still there?

SM: (inaudible) -- to -- did you hear the last part?

JI: No, so it cut out a little bit. You were saying that she was living in the houses of the people that she was keeping house for, and then it --

SM: Correct.

JI: -- got [05:00] quiet.

SM: Oh. OK, yeah, so yes, she worked in, you know, people's houses, and then (inaudible) [the money?]. But then when

she sent for us, then she couldn't live in -- you know, inside their house anymore and she had to rent an apartment so that four of us can live. And then she started working, more like, in Temecula. So, those were really long hours, she would get up really early in the morning and go to work and come home and bring work with her. And you know, she would get paid by the [piece?] and that was very little money. And now she had -- you know, she had to pay for us, plus the apartment, which before, you know, was easier for her, because she didn't have to pay for an apartment, and the money, she would turn into El Salvador, which meant that, you know, it would stretch a little bit.

JJ: So, you're all living in America at this point, and your mother is working to support you. How did college fit into that? Did you go away to college? Did you live at home with your family and also go to college? Like how did you balance that?

SM: So Long Beach, we lived about a half an hour away from Long Beach State. And, I didn't know how to speak English when I came, so for a year, I went to the local high school and took English as a Second Language classes. But, when they're teaching (inaudible), they're not really teaching you grammar; they're just teaching you how to speak; they're teaching you the language. And so, when I went to

college, that was hard because, you know, all the grammar I didn't know. So, they enrolled me in English composition, and you know, it was like, OK well, I don't know how to write. So that was definitely a struggle. But, went back to your question, the first semester I lived in the dorms, but I was on financial aid, and my mother was not familiar with the system, and no one that I knew was familiar with the system. So, I filled out the applications as well as I could, and in September, I moved into the dorms, and you know, with the money that they gave me, I bought sheets, and pillows, and books, and stuff like that. And in October, I went back to the financial aid office, and I said, when do I get the check, you know? And they said, oh, you only get one disbursement per semester, so I had no money at that point, and I decided to -- that I couldn't' stay in the dorms, so I started looking for a job, and I found a job where they gave me room and board, and they paid me a stipend, so I moved out with this family, and my job with them was to take care of their son; he had cystic fibrosis, so I would do hist therapy, lung therapy in the morning, and then he also needed one in the evening, so you know, I would go to school, and then when I came back, either like, eight or nine, then I would do his therapy. And I lived with them for about four years, or so.

JJ: Wow. And so, while you were doing this, and going to school, when did you start applying to dental [10:00] schools? Like what did you -- did you have your sights on Harvard at this point, or what else was going on?

SM: So, since I already knew when I was in El Salvador that I wanted to go to dental school. On day one, I started reading about what were the requirements in getting involved with the pre-professional organization at Long Beach, and reading about [TIMA programs?], so I think I was a sophomore, yeah, my sophomore year. I went to that pre-professional help program that Harvard has, I don't know if they still have it, for minorities.

JJ: Yeah, yeah, the summer program?

SM: Yeah, so I met Dr. Henry, and I met -- and I lived in Cambridge, so I -- I didn't think I was going to get in, but you know, it was sort of like a dream. And that was sort of like, what started prompting me to want to go to Harvard, but like I said, I didn't think I was going to, you know, get in.

JJ: So, did you apply to other schools too, or -- like what was your plan?

SM: I did.

JJ: What was the application process like?

SM: I did; I bought a book on how to apply, and then there was one section on the interview process, what to wear. So, I really prepared for the -- I took the interview and the whole application process very seriously, and I applied really early, you know, in summer, I had all my applications; I applied to 15 schools, and I wrote all the essays, you know, wrote them and rewrote them since that was not my forte. And I spent the money that I had saved to go to the interviews and I went to Northwestern, Boston, and I applied to a total of 15 schools, like I said, and I actually got into all of them. So, it was quite a process. Quite expensive; I was too nervous to apply for like, those deferment applications, you know, when you have financial aid, and you can just ask not to pay the fee, because I felt like that was going to take time, so I'd rather pay the application fee so that my application wouldn't be delayed.

J1: So, after getting accepted to all of these schools, why did you choose Harvard?

SM: So sorry, you got cut off.

J1: Oh. (laughter) I just said, so after choosing all of these schools, after -- or rather, after getting accepted to all of these schools, why did you choose Harvard?

SM: So, it was -- it came down to two schools at the end. UC-San Francisco, and Harvard. And, they were both, at that time, considered like the top two schools in the country. And most people said, you know, a lot of people would tell me, you should go to San Francisco, because it's a state school. You know, it's the state of California, so when you come back, you're going to have a hard time taking the exam, the board. But, I thought -- and also the cost. But, I thought, you know, Harvard is only one opportunity that I have to do this, so in -- you know, like the best school, so I didn't hesitate [15:00] in terms of the cost, or going away. Of course, once I got there, it was a different story, because I didn't have, you know, any family, or any friends, and I remember, I was telling this to my daughter yesterday, because I remember, you know, just taking my suitcases and going over there, not having, you know, anyone to go with me, like you know, I do with her. And in terms of culture, I started noticing things like, you know, my shoes were made out of plastic from Payless, and some of the other girls had like, you know, very nice shoes, or my sweaters were made out of acrylic, and their sweaters were made out of wool. You know, I started noticing things like that, that here, I hadn't really noticed. As well as the food, you know, back then

there was no Salvadorian food, and it was one Mexican restaurant, [called Chi Chi's?] that was not very Mexican. So, the culture shock was definitely very, very hard.

JJ: So, when you got here, did you get involved with any groups or clubs on campus, or any specific like, you know, student things? What was -- I mean, a more broad question is, you know, what was it like to come to school here at that point? Did you find a community of people, or did you still feel kind of alone?

SM: So there was an organization called Chicano Medical Association, and in -- I became friends with some of the people in the organization. So, you know, we did form our own community, but I don't think that the rest of the students were as inviting or accepting. But, you know, we did form our own -- we had like eight people that we would have like, potlucks, and have dinner with, or study with.

JJ: Were there any, you know, you had mentioned Joseph Henry earlier. Did you have any mentors on campus while you were here?

SM: Um, Dr. Henry was my mentor, and I -- the first year, I did really well at Long Beach, but again, like I said earlier, I didn't know how to write, and what I did was I took a lot of classes where writing was not a requirement, like you know, math, and things like that where you just write an

answer; you didn't have to write a whole essay. Plus the load's, you know, so much heavier that I had a really tough time my first year, and I fail a lot of my classes. So they said, you know, you have to repeat the year or leave. And so I met with Dr. Henry. I remember him telling me, you know, to me it was, one, I couldn't come home and say, I fail, because a lot of the people in my community, in my church, they were looking up to me, you know, that this girl, this poor girl from Maywood, I come into Harvard, and back then there weren't as many Salvadorians that were getting ahead, so (inaudible) my mother had done, I really couldn't come back and (inaudible). So, I remember crying and telling Dr. Henry, it's so embarrassing; [20:00] it's so humiliating. I can't go back and do -- repeat the year, because all the other classmates are going to be in second year, and they're going to see me. And so, he said to me, you know in five years, in ten years, no one is going to know, and no one is going to care. So, you know, that was so helpful to have him just say, you know, kind of like, just swallow and get up and try it again, and the next year, so I repeated the first year, and the next year, I had so much anxiety every time I would take the exams every Friday, I would like, literally get sick; I would get like diarrhea and vomiting. But I was able to pass my classes.

And then second year, it got easier, and third year, I was coasting; I was getting honors because by then, I was working with the patients. And then it was more meaningful than just reading books, that I was not used to spending hours and hours and hours in the library studying.

JJ: Excellent. So you said you graduated in 1989. Were there any other moments or stories that you'd like to tell me about going to Harvard Medical School, or Harvard School of Dental Medicine, excuse me.

SM: So I -- when I was there, it was very, very hard, and very -- it really did a number of my self-esteem. But, I also found that there were so many opportunities, and because we were a small group, the -- I can't remember the name of the (inaudible) at the time, but you know, there -- by the second year, they're already meeting with us saying, OK, you know, what are you going to do, you need to do the research, you know, I told them I was interested in doing some work with the community, so they put me in contact with one of the professors that was working in Arizona, with the Indian reservation. And, when I graduated and I came to UCLA to do my endo program, the -- I had three co-residents, and they were complaining, you know, like oh, I have to stay on call, or oh, there's so much reading. But by then I was now used to the pace at Harvard, and I was

look at them like, this is nothing guys, this is so easy. And by eight, nine o'clock, I was done with my reading, and I was -- you know, was ahead of the work. So, even though going through the program was really hard, once I graduated, I was so thankful, because I was so prepared.

JJ: And could you tell me, just briefly about, what has your career been after Harvard School of Dental Medicine? What have you been up to?

SM: So, I came and did a GPR at Wadsworth VA Hospital, and then when I was there, one of my advisors -- actually, he was the head of the program, he mentioned that he was going to start an endo program at UCLA, and he encouraged me to apply, and I applied, and I became an endodontist; I opened my own practice, again, not knowing what I was getting myself into. I wouldn't recommend opening a practice right out of school because, you know, we didn't even know the business part; you only know, you know, the dental part, but even then, you know, you don't have the [speed?]. But, I had my own practice for the last 26 years, and I also became really involved in the community. I feel very strongly [25:00] that all the opportunities that I have, that I had, other people have worked hard to pave that road for me, so I became involved, and I helped start a group called SALEF, a Salvadorian organization that helps

Salvadorians with money to go to college, and also does things like civics, engagement, get out the vote, literacy programs, basically help the community become integrated into the mainstream community. And I've also been very involved with the dental association. I'm part of the California Dental Association, and my chapter is the LA [Dental?], so I was the president, and I've been on the board for the last 20 years.

So I have two daughters, one is 25, and the other one is 22. The twenty-five year old went to Yale Undergrad, and is now, just finished her first year at [Moldova?] Dental School, and the 22-year-old went to the junior college, local junior college, and is now starting Santa Barbara for, she's thinking that she's going to go to law school, but in the meantime, she's studying environmental science.

JJ: That's awesome. So, we've reached basically the end of my list of questions. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me before we wrap up? Any other stories, or thoughts that you have?

SM: I -- like I said earlier, I -- when I was going to the program, it was really hard, and I didn't know that it was going to be that hard, but I feel that giving me the opportunity to go to Harvard changed my life, and it has

created a way for me to become successful. Like I said, I opened my practice, and then with the money that I earned from the practice, I saved it, and I invested in real estate, so I bought a lot of apartments over the years, and I have two different businesses, and I think that the way out of poverty has been the opportunity that I was given to go to Harvard. Because it's not just school, but also the people that you're exposed to. I was part of the board of directors of HAA, so for three years, I would go back, and you know, you meet so many people, and when you meet these people, you talk about different things, and that puts ideas in your head, and so I feel very strongly about, that education is the way of getting out of poverty. So I go and talk to high school students and college fairs and encourage them to get an education, because that's the way that they're going to get ahead.

JJ: That's really excellent. Well, Dr. Molina, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today, and for being part of this project. I'm going to hit stop on the recording.

END OF AUDIO FILE