

FOUNDATION
FOR A HEALTHY
FUTURE



Providing world-class
care for our future
generations



Foundation for the Greater Good

Thank you for taking the time to read the third issue of the UCLA Dentistry bi-annual magazine. As we head into 2019 and say goodbye to 2018, I'd like to recognize the hard work of all our faculty, staff, and students this past year. It's our collective dedication to excellence in education, research, patient care, and public service that sets us apart. A special thank you also to our alums and friends; your support helps us achieve our vision and goals.

In this particular issue, we focus on our pediatric dentistry clinics, our residency programs, and three impressive alums. We found a running theme in our conversations with our pediatric dentists—they are inclined to use their training and skills for the greater good. Whether this is through working in non-traditional settings, volunteering, or pursuing public health opportunities, pediatric dentists are empathetic, compassionate professionals. This wasn't a surprise; it was a validation of something we already knew. UCLA Pediatric Dentistry has been making valuable contributions to UCLA's surrounding communities, and to the specialty overall, for more than 50 years. This is evidenced by the care we provide to hundreds of children every year and by the caliber of the alums who complete our program. I hope you enjoy reading about how the UCLA School of Dentistry is creating the foundation for a healthy future for our most precious patients.

In addition, we welcome Dr. Hung Ton-That to our faculty. He is making UCLA his professional home after being away for nearly two decades. We also feature long-time volunteer

faculty member, Dr. Ray Padilla, one of the few sports dentistry and dental trauma experts in the country.

If you have an idea for a story or just want to send us your thoughts about what was featured in this magazine, please email us at info@dentistry.ucla.edu. Your opinions and thoughts are important to us.

Sincerely,

Paul H. Krebsbach, DDS, PhD
Dean and Professor

About our cover artist: Hanna Barczyk is an award-winning illustrator who works with major publications and other institutional clients. In her art work, Hanna combines a variety of tools including pen and ink, acrylic paint, woodblock, and digital. "My work is inspired by different forms of the human condition, emotions, as well as how the body moves in different states. I love to dance, and often use movements and expressions from the body in my work. I'm also curious of the world around me, nature, books, urban life, posters, museums, murals, and people's stories all inspire me." hannabarczyk.com

TABLE of CONTENTS



1

1 Foundation for a Healthy Future

Section of Pediatric Dentistry addresses the needs of the community in all the right ways

5 Learning the Ropes

Dr. Donielle Williams, pediatric dentistry resident, takes her specialty training to heart

7 Making a Career of Giving Back

Three pediatric dentistry alums use their skills and passion to elevate children's oral health

13 Coming Full Circle

New professor comes home

15 Putting Guards in Place

Volunteer faculty makes a career of guarding athletes' important assets — their teeth



7



13

Top left image: Creating a foundation for a healthy future is our number one priority. Top right photo, left to right: Pediatric dentistry alums, Dr. Oariona Lowe, PD '84 and Dr. Mark Lisagor, PD '77. Above photo: Dr. Hung Ton-That, newly appointed professor of oral biology.

ABOUT THIS MAGAZINE

DEAN
Paul H. Krebsbach, DDS, PhD

EDITOR
Brianna Aldrich
Director for Communications

COPY EDITORS
Jane Fransella
Mallory Gompert

DESIGNERS
Brianna Aldrich
Brian Lozano

COVER ARTWORK
Hanna Barczyk

PHOTOGRAPHY
Chris Flynn, unless otherwise noted.

FOUNDATION FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE

"I can't explain how special it is to be a part of a child's physical, psychological and intellectual growth... it's truly priceless," said Dr. Daniela Silva, associate professor and chair of the section of pediatric dentistry. **"At UCLA, we train our residents to see a child differently. Our role in a child's life is beyond treating their teeth; we are a part of their overall development."**

An old proverb says that, "it takes a village to raise a child," and we believe that pediatric dentists are a crucial part of that village. Ideally, a patient will start seeing a pediatric dentist by their first birthday and will see them throughout their childhood into adolescence until they're 18 years old. "After a child's second birthday, primary care visits occur once a year and dental visits are every six months. If something is wrong, either physically or psychologically, we can spot any issues during their dental visits," notes Dr. Silva.

A study in the journal *Pediatrics* showed that children who have their first dental visit before age one have 40 percent lower dental costs in their first five years than children who do not. This is due to the cost of dental and medical procedures that may be necessary as a result of poor oral health.

Establishing good oral health habits at a young age is vital to preventing caries disease and a lifetime of dental problems. The section of pediatric dentistry at UCLA creates a dental home for some of the most vulnerable pediatric patient populations in southern California. The section also understands that to create a foundation for a healthy future, it takes evidence-based research translated into effective health policies, well-trained specialists, and a collaborative approach to oral health.

"It's the job of pediatric dentists, primary care providers, social workers, teachers, parents, and any other adult in a child's life to provide them with the guidance and tools they need to lead a healthy, productive life," said Dr. Silva, who is also the Thomas K. Barber Endowed Chair in Pediatric Dentistry.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AT THE TOP

Dr. Francisco Ramos-Gomez, professor of pediatric dentistry and director of the UCLA Center for Children's Oral Health, has made it his life's work to combat early childhood caries (ECC)—the number one chronic, yet preventable disease in children. As an expert on ECC prevention research and policies affecting pediatric oral health, he and his team recently organized a two-day Oral Health Innovation Forum

that brought together nearly 200 health care practitioners, government officials, and members of UCLA's health sciences. The goal of the forum, which was partially funded by the UCLA Office of Interdisciplinary and Cross Campus Affairs, was to develop innovative strategies and health policy suggestions to improve oral health care among California's children and underserved populations.

"As a leader in pediatric health, not just localized in Los Angeles but also throughout the country, UCLA strives to be at the forefront," said Dr. Ramos-Gomez. "We felt that a larger conversation was needed to position children's oral health as issues of health equity, social justice, and human rights."

A range of suggestions came out of the forum, which focused on topics facing the health care system as it relates to children's oral health, including finance, policy developments, diversity issues, access and barriers to care, and emerging technology. There was an important emphasis placed on prevention rather than on clinical treatments, and suggestions were centered on instituting outcome-based and incentive-based reimbursement systems. Another idea was to partner with elementary schools to promote oral health and to administer mandatory oral health exams. The committees also advocated using a portion of the funds from taxes on soda, gambling, and marijuana, as well as funds from opioid lawsuits, for oral health promotion.

At the educational and training level, the idea of greater diversity was discussed, as the belief was that university admissions criteria should not only meet the demands of the institution but also the public. For example, increased diversity of health care providers could be achieved through expanding pipeline programs in mostly minority and low-income middle and high schools. Interprofessional education and cross-training between primary care providers and dental professionals was envisioned, including how medical professionals could implement oral care into their practices and how dental professionals could work alongside physicians in integrating oral health at primary care sites.

"The forum revealed the need to develop new policies to address children's oral health. Among other strategies, a comprehensive dental visit in the first year of life could be made mandatory, which would include preventative guidance by a pediatric dentist," said Dr. Ramos-Gomez. **"Increasing access to care and reducing oral health disparities will go a long way in creating healthier communities across California and nationwide."**

TRAINING CULTURALLY COMPETENT SPECIALISTS

Many of the solutions brought up at the forum have already been implemented in the pediatric dentistry residency curriculum. Two back-to-back grants from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (#D88HP20129), the first of which was awarded in 2010, have helped support programmatic changes—instead of just teaching residents to treat consequences of poor oral health, the program teaches ways to improve children's health through disease prevention and management. Most importantly, the greatest benefit can be seen in the diversity, skills, and preparedness that our graduates possess, as well as in the quality and breadth of the comprehensive care that our patients receive.

With successful integration of the newest curriculum, which focuses on updated didactics, advocacy opportunities, and applied learning experiences at community-based organizations, the section has seen a significant increase in applicants to the program. "In the past five years, we've built a reputation of offering a program that has a strong clinical and didactic curriculum, along with a robust public health component, and this is reflected in the candidates who are applying to the residency program," said Dr. Silva. "The results are graduates who are highly skilled, well-rounded, and well-prepared leaders in pediatric dentistry."

Residents are also encouraged to focus on treating the patient holistically and within the context of the social determinants of health, including specific regional and demographic influences. **"Our philosophy of care is a minimally invasive approach. And one of the most important points I tell our residents is to try to gain the**

trust of the children and their parents, because this trust builds a friendship and starts a dialogue to begin educating them about oral and systemic health, and how to turn inappropriate habits into good ones," said Dr. Ramos-Gomez.

A paper published in the *Journal of Dental Education* in 2014 about the paradigm shift in the section's curriculum, authored by Dr. Ramos-Gomez, Dr. Silva and additional colleagues from the dental school, outlines the positive changes they've seen in the graduates since the implementation of the new approach. It states, "The program shows great promise for training pediatric residents skilled in improving oral health for individual patients and the population at large, fostering interprofessional education, and integrating oral health care into the scope of other types of health care practitioners."

One example of how residents gain real-world clinical experiences is the Infant Oral Care Program, where residents are present for an infant's or toddler's visit, prior to the age of one, at a partnering clinic. Residents learn about community involvement, cultural competencies, and parental engagement. This stronger emphasis on public health in the program appears to be changing the direction of many recent graduates' career choices. The majority are still choosing to enter private practice, but an increasing number of them are choosing to practice in non-traditional clinical care settings to treat the underserved population of children in community health centers and/or federally qualified health centers. During the last six years, UCLA School of Dentistry has graduated 45 pediatric dentists and at least 14 of them are serving in these vulnerable patient population settings.

"At UCLA, we train our residents to see a child differently. Our role in a child's life is beyond treating their teeth; we are a part of their overall development."

CREATING A DENTAL HOME FOR THE UNDERSERVED

Integral to the training program is addressing the needs of the patient population, and doing so in an environment that is welcoming and accessible. The dental school operates two pediatric dental clinics and rotates residents at partnering clinics scattered across the larger Los Angeles metropolitan area. In the 2017-2018 fiscal year, the UCLA Children's Dental Center in Westwood administered over 6,500 visits and the pediatric dentistry clinic at the Wilson-Jennings-Bloomfield UCLA Venice Dental Center administered over 2,000 visits. What makes these two UCLA-operated clinics so vital to the community is that roughly 85 percent of the patient population is low-income and underserved. Many of the patients come from families that are living 250 percent below the federal poverty level. Over 75 percent of children seen at the UCLA pediatric dentistry clinics have Denti-Cal insurance coverage through the state of California, but unfortunately, there are several vital procedures that remain non-covered benefits.

Another issue that many families grapple with is that their local community clinic, which accepts Denti-Cal, may not administer advanced dental procedures. For families who have young patients who are medically compromised, or those who are frightened of dentists, oral sedation and intra-venous general anesthesia is the safest option. Unfortunately, while these services are covered by Denti-Cal, the reimbursement rate for these treatments doesn't come close to meeting the dental school's costs. Despite the financial loss, the clinics remain committed to accepting these special cases.

"All pediatric residents, along with our dental students, are taught to consider the outside influences that affect overall and oral health. We see a lot of children who experience toxic stress, like housing insecurity, economic hardship, or unstable home environments," said Dr. Clarice Law, clinical professor of pediatric dentistry and an alum of the residency program. "Pediatric dentists must be empathetic to all situations, whether healthy and well-adjusted or under special circumstances. We treat our patients as if they were our own children."

Due to the fact that many of the families who select the UCLA pediatric dentistry clinics as their dental home are predominantly low income, the section and the dental school actively seek grants and funding to help subsidize treatment and associated costs. It is undeniable that conscientious oral health care during an individual's formative years is directly linked to overall health in adulthood. The support of partners like The Nicholas Endowment helps the Center in Westwood to be better equipped to provide care to the pediatric patients with the most urgent needs.

Administering tens of thousands of visits over the past two decades has taken its toll on the Center in Westwood, which is undergoing a massive renovation. Soon the broken equipment, worn-out chairs, and outdated space will be history. Initiated by the former dean of the dental school, Dr. No-Hee Park, the new space will feature ten state-of-the-art operatories, two surgical suites, a new infant oral health room, a sterilization area, a reading wall, and a clinic lounge. The newly renovated Center will continue to function as a major safety net and dental home for the low-income and underserved children of West Los Angeles and its neighboring

communities. The Center will also be a special place for educating and training the next generation of pediatric oral health care providers.

"We asked ourselves, how can we as a dental school and major regional provider of pediatric dental care contribute to our community and its most vulnerable members?" said Dr. Paul Krebsbach, the current dean of the UCLA School of Dentistry. **"Our answer was simple. We need to invest in a new, modern clinic that can withstand the traffic of the thousands of children and their families; we need to actively engage with our colleagues about policies affecting our**

patients; and we need to continue training professionals who have real-world experience in an ever-changing environment for the children and their future."

With nearly \$1 Million in funding already raised to support this effort, thanks to contributions from alumni and friends, UCLA Children's Dental Center is giving children the opportunity for a brighter future. To help UCLA Children's Dental Center give more children the gift of a healthy smile, contact Mallory Gompert at (310) 206-6079 or mgompert@support.ucla.edu.

Our sincerest thanks to our alumni and friends who have already pledged their support to the UCLA Children's Dental Center Renovation Campaign. This honor roll lists all philanthropic gifts above \$50,000 made to the Children's Dental Center Fund for Excellence between July 1, 2018 and November 30, 2018.

Bold and Italicized – Campaign Co Chair | **Bold** – Campaign Committee Member

\$100,000+

Oariona Lowe, DDS, PD '84, MPH '16 - Gift made in honor of Dr. Donald Duperon
Mark S. Lisagor, DDS '73, PD '77 & Terri E. Lisagor, EdD, MS, RD
 The Ahmanson Foundation
 The Nicholas Endowment

\$50,000

Ann Azama, DDS, PD '86, MS '87 & Randall J. Lee, MD
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Lisa D. Brennan, DDS, PD '77 & Albert E. Cosand
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Eunha Cho, DDS '03, PD '05 & Howard Kong
 The CSPD Foundation
 Gregory K. Rabitz, DDS, PD '03 & Mary D. Rabitz
Corina Ramirez, DDS, PD '06 & Robert Ramirez
 Space Maintainers Laboratory

"Increasing access to care and reducing oral health disparities will go a long way in creating healthier communities across California and nationwide."



Artist rendering of new clinic space.

*“I want to make
a difference in
the smiles of
young patients
—one tooth, one
smile, one child
at a time.”*

- Dr. Donielle Williams

Dr. Donielle Williams, a pediatric dentistry resident, said her drive to pursue dentistry stemmed from the desire to improve peoples’ self-esteem. She witnessed first-hand how a lack of dental care can affect a person’s well-being since her father didn’t receive oral health care for the first 18 years of his life. As a result of the condition of his teeth, he had to endure corrective surgery and years of embarrassment. It was her father’s experience that ultimately piqued her interest in the dental profession.

A graduate of the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Dentistry, Dr. Williams is well into her first year of a 2-year pediatric dentistry residency program at UCLA. She expects to graduate in 2020 with the skills to start her own private practice focusing on treating the underserved, in her hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. She chose pediatric dentistry after a mission trip she took to Honduras while in dental school, where she had the opportunity to treat a population with severe oral health disparities. “The majority of the patients we were treating were children who had never seen a dentist, and the prevalence of early childhood caries was awful. We were extracting the teeth of children as young as two years old. It was very sad and eye-opening.”

Dr. Williams continued to make public health a priority throughout her four years of dental school. She regularly attended health fairs and screenings, in addition to volunteering at local community health clinics. She was accepted into an externship at UCLA, during the summer between her third and fourth years of dental school, where she had the opportunity to shadow Dr. Daniela Silva, chair of pediatric dentistry and program director for the residency programs.

“I knew then that UCLA was the place for me. Not only does UCLA house some of the highest regarded professionals in pediatric dentistry, but the mission here is truly remarkable. It’s about training specialists who put their patient’s well-being first and are motivated and equipped to make a positive impact in the field of pediatric dentistry.”

Another passion of Dr. Williams is mentoring pre-dental students to help increase diversity in the dental profession. As a dental student, she served on the national executive board for the Student National Dental Association (SNDA)—the student arm of the NDA that strives to improve diversity and inclusion in the dental profession. “I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for the guidance and encouragement of my mentors and professors. My goal is to be a role model to young children, adolescents, and teens, especially those from backgrounds underrepresented in dentistry. I want to encourage them that, ‘You too can be a dentist.’”

Over the next two years, Dr. Williams hopes to expand her knowledge and begin thinking like a specialist. She’s also pursuing a Master’s degree in public health and hopes to use her training to positively impact her community and reduce oral health disparities. **“Servant leadership has made me a more culturally competent, compassionate, and understanding pediatric dentist-in-training. I want to make a difference in the smiles of young patients—one tooth, one smile, one child at a time.”**



Learning the Ropes

Dr. Donielle Williams, pediatric dentistry resident, takes her specialty training to heart

MAKING A CAREER OF GIVING BACK

Three pediatric dentistry alums use their skills and passion to elevate children's oral health



You could say that giving back runs in **Dr. Oariona Lowe's** family. For the UCLA pediatric dentistry alum, it was the memory of seeing her father give away clothing and shoes to families who couldn't afford to buy them that stayed with her into adulthood. Early in her career, she provided free dental services to families at outreach events; a practice she continues today. That altruism has been passed down to her son, who has aspirations of starting a foundation to raise money for underserved communities.

In addition to her dental degree and two advanced training certificates, Dr. Lowe recently completed an executive master of public health degree from the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. Her background in public health has helped her develop educational and oral health programs with global organizations in underserved countries. Ultimately, she plans to put her public health knowledge to use by establishing a non-profit organization with her son.

Teaching was Dr. Lowe's first passion. As an assistant professor at Howard University, she taught courses in health sciences for several years before wanting more of a challenge. Prompting from a colleague pushed her to apply to dental school at the same university where she taught. Juggling dental school and keeping her teaching position was the challenge she was looking for and one that would build the foundation for her life's work—the promotion of oral health.

After completing her DDS degree from Howard University, she decided to pursue a general practice certificate at the Eastman Dental Center, University of Rochester Institute of Oral Health. While there, she met her husband, Dr. Evangelos Rossopoulos, a fellow dentist and a prosthodontist.

As a perpetual student, Dr. Lowe began looking into pediatric dentistry residency programs and selected UCLA. **"I was attracted to the clinical experience that I would receive at UCLA. And the reality exceeded my expectations. There was a hospital dentistry component to the program that was beyond filling teeth and cleanings."**

After she received her pediatric dentistry certificate in 1984, Dr. Lowe worked for two years as the director of dental services at the City of Hope Medical Center in Duarte, California, treating medically compromised patients. "I used a lot of my UCLA training. It was a very intense position, but it was an experience that prepared me for private practice and allowed me to write and publish articles on oral health care for cancer patients."

In 1987, Dr. Lowe joined forces with her husband, and the couple opened their first practice in Whittier, California. For Dr. Lowe, offering specialized services, such as sedation, for children with special needs was a top priority.

"As a pediatric dentist, I have always been interested in how to improve oral health through education, disease prevention, advocacy, and community involvement. I have



Dr. Oariona Lowe, PD '84, MPH '16

Pediatric Dentistry Alum & UCLA Dentistry Board of Counselors Member

been able to impact generations of families by providing them with the tools and knowledge they need to manage their own oral health."

Over the next three decades, the couple expanded their business to include practices in Corona, Hacienda Heights, and Huntington Beach. Throughout her career, Dr. Lowe pursued several other professional and personal endeavors. Along with her position as a California Dental Association Trustee and a Trustee for the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Foundation, she is the immediate past-president of the Western Society of Pediatric Dentistry, past-president of the California Society of Pediatric Dentistry, board member

of UCLA Friends of Pediatric Dentistry, board member of the UCLA Dentistry's Board of Counselors, co-chair of the UCLA Children's Dental Center Renovation Campaign, benefactor of the Dr. Oariona Lowe Endowed Scholarship, and member of UCLA Dentistry faculty.

If you were to ask her how she has time for everything she's involved in, she'll tell you it's because she's passionate about being a mentor and a leader, and making sure that young professionals are given ample opportunities to learn. **"Paying for college and all of my postgraduate work was a struggle, so my heart will always be in supporting students and helping them to reach their dreams."**

"As a pediatric dentist, I have always been interested in how to improve oral health through education, disease prevention, advocacy, and community involvement."

“It’s always been in my DNA to give back. I believe that we’re not on this planet to consume, but to leave it a better place than before we were here.”



Dr. Mark Lisagor, '73, PD '77

*Pediatric Dentistry Alum, Full-time Volunteer
& Public Health Advocate*

Dr. Mark Lisagor's desire to become a dentist began at a young age when he went to have a retainer made to fix a noticeable diastema. That dental visit made an impact on the impressionable 9-year-old Mark. After moving to Los Angeles as a teenager, he started taking college courses at UCLA, which denoted the beginning of more than a decade at the world-renowned campus.

“Going to UCLA for my undergraduate degree ended up being one of the best decisions I ever made,” said Dr. Lisagor. “I met my wife Terri at UCLA. For my studies, I chose to major in public health because I believed that everyone should have access to quality health care.”

After receiving his bachelor's degree, Dr. Lisagor recalled the dentist's help from the decade prior and was inspired to apply to dental school. After being accepted into the UCLA School of Dentistry's Class of 1973, he continued his passion for public health. While in dental school, he provided dental care to Native Americans in central Arizona for two summers in a row. After receiving his DDS degree, public health continued to be a priority, and he enlisted in the Indian Health Service and made his way back to Arizona.

“I was familiar with the patient population and felt I could make an impact,” said Dr. Lisagor. “It was during those first few years of treating Navajo children that I decided to specialize in pediatric dentistry. It was the right path.”

UCLA had just started a 2-year hospital-based pediatric dentistry residency program at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in the city of Torrance. Dr. Lisagor was accepted into the program as he knew that the caliber of training would be exceptional.

Upon completion of his residency program in 1977, Dr. Lisagor had the opportunity to start a practice in the expanding Southern California community of Camarillo and also to purchase a practice from a retiring dentist in Oxnard. Fresh out of residency, he was already running two practices on his own. Over the next 30 years, he built a name for himself in Ventura County and grew from two locations to four. The practice is continuing to grow even after his retirement in 2010.

As his practice grew, Dr. Lisagor began to add more specialists, giving him more freedom to expand on passions

for public health, advocacy, and community involvement. He started volunteering with the Boys and Girls Club of Camarillo, and became involved with CDA Cares. He was even able to entice the organizers to create a CDA Cares Ventura. In addition, a promise to his business partner led to an international volunteer trip to Jerusalem to provide dental care to the underserved. After that trip, he was hooked on traveling to foreign countries to provide dental care. To date, he has coordinated and led nearly 60 overseas dental clinics and has worked in nine different countries.

In his eighth year of retirement, Dr. Lisagor's “hobby” of volunteering is essentially a full-time job, and he's never been busier or happier. “My international volunteer work feeds three of my passions—travel to places most people don't get to see, the joy of project managing, and, of course, giving back.”

Dr. Lisagor is also working on policies that affect access to care, which is where he believes he can make the biggest impact. In 2008, he was elected to the Ventura County Board of Education, where he focuses his attention on helping children with special needs and those in foster care. He is also very involved with the UCLA Friends of Pediatric Dentistry serving as the past president for the support group that fundraises for UCLA's section of pediatric dentistry. This past July, Mark accepted the role of co-chair to lead the UCLA Children's Dental Center Renovation Campaign.

“People may not realize that along with having an incredible training program, an entire generation of pediatric dentists are being exposed to the needs of the community. UCLA graduates are choosing to practice in non-traditional settings where their skills are needed the most. I'm so impressed with the UCLA Dentistry leadership and pediatric dentistry faculty.”

Dr. Lisagor says that he and Terri, who recently celebrated their 50th anniversary, are thrilled to give back through philanthropy and volunteering. He says that he wouldn't have been able to accomplish as much had it not been for the support of his wife, a professor at Cal State Northridge, and his two children. He now has added the proud title of grandfather to his many roles.

Dr. Alejandra Rivera, a pediatric dentistry alum, took a slightly windier road to becoming a dentist than some of her colleagues. In high school, she worked part-time for a dentist and didn't imagine she'd ever enter the profession after college. Instead, to help fund her undergraduate tuition, JP Morgan Chase offered her a scholarship in exchange for several years of working in their investment banking department upon graduation.

After completing her bachelor's degree in psychology from Queens College, CUNY, and working for JP Morgan Chase, she quickly realized finance wasn't the right path for her. She tried a few other professions, but no other fields captured her interest.

Alejandra returned to the same dentist's office she worked at while in high school. "I finally felt at home and started exploring the idea of becoming a dentist. For the first time since finishing college, I was excited for the future."

Dr. Rivera grew up in Washington Heights, New York, the neighborhood that is also home to Columbia University, College of Dental Medicine. She had admired the campus from afar, and after completing a post-baccalaureate program while working full-time at the dentist's office, she applied to and was accepted into Columbia Dentistry's Class of 2015. **"Shortly into my clinical blocks, I found that pediatrics brought me the most happiness. I knew then that pediatric dentistry was the right path for me after dental school."**

Having gone to undergraduate and dental school in the city she also grew up in, Dr. Rivera felt the need to spread her wings a little and applied to UCLA's pediatric dentistry residency program.

"The culture in Los Angeles was the biggest draw for me. It's a laid-back environment, but I also got to experience what it was like to practice in the real world. **For me, UCLA had the perfect balance between didactics and clinical practice, which was what I grew accustomed to in dental school.**"

Dr. Rivera graduated from UCLA in 2017 and was ready to begin her 2-year commitment to the National Health Service Corps (NHSC). In dental school, she was the recipient of a NHSC grant in exchange for providing health care in an

underserved area following graduation. In fall of 2017, she moved to the outskirts of Green Bay, Wisconsin, and became the only pediatric dentist in the area available to treat underserved children.

"I went from New York to Los Angeles to Green Bay. It was a huge culture shock. Those first few months were overwhelming," said Dr. Rivera. "They needed Spanish-speaking providers, and pediatric dentists are even harder to come by. There are a lot of immigrants from Mexico, South America, and Central America in Green Bay. The patient population is very similar to the patient population I treated in Los Angeles."

Dr. Rivera sees patients at a community dental clinic where children are either covered by government health insurance or have no insurance at all. She is their only option for care and guidance. The demand for her services and expertise has been incredibly valuable to the families in her town. With a lack of education and understanding of oral hygiene, the majority of her cases involve severe early childhood caries.

"I have learned a lot and worked on a multitude of cases that are typically only seen in textbooks. UCLA prepared me to make the best decisions for my patients. Graduates of UCLA Pediatric Dentistry learn to do things the right way."

For the second year of her NHSC commitment, Dr. Rivera transferred to central Florida where she is, again, the only pediatric dentist in the area. In this case, she is also the first pediatric dentist that the community health clinic has had.

"When I was young, there were times where I was covered by Medicaid and had challenges with access to care. **It's important to me to leave a positive impression on the families that I meet. I hope that my recommendations change my patients' behaviors about oral hygiene and set the stage for a lifetime of good oral health.**"

“It’s important to me to leave a positive impression on the families that I meet. I hope that my recommendations change my patients’ behaviors about oral hygiene and set the stage for a lifetime of good oral health.”



Photo: Dr. Ryan Price

Dr. Alejandra Rivera, PD '17

*Pediatric Dentistry Alum & National Health Service
Corps Scholarship Grantee*

COMING FULL CIRCLE

New Professor Comes Home

“Research ignores borders; it brings people together and opens doors. These are the reasons why I love what I do,” said Dr. Hung Ton-That.

For Dr. Ton-That, receiving an offer from the UCLA School of Dentistry for a full-time appointment as a professor of oral biology with his own lab was surreal. The two-time Bruin alum received his bachelor of science in chemistry and his PhD in microbiology from UCLA. Having moved his family around three times in the last two decades, he now plans to call UCLA home for the foreseeable future.

“I kind of grew up at UCLA,” said Dr. Ton-That. “To be back here doing what I love and working with leaders in the oral health field is an honor and a privilege. I’ve come full circle.”

Hung Ton-That immigrated from Vietnam to Boston with his sister when he was 24 years old as a refugee. After enduring a few weeks of a harsh Northeastern winter, the siblings moved to sunny California. He had planned to attend medical school after his undergraduate degree but was offered a job as a lab technician in Dr. Olaf Schneewind’s laboratory in UCLA’s Microbiology Department.

“I didn’t know anything about microbiology except the little I read about in my chemistry classes,” said Hung Ton-That. “After those first few weeks in the lab, I didn’t look back. I couldn’t wait to get to the lab to discover something new.” He later selected the Schneewind lab for his pre-doctoral work to study staph bacteria and its ability to infect a living organism through determinants on its surface, obtaining his PhD degree in 2000.

In 2001, Dr. Ton-That left California and moved with Dr. Schneewind to the University of Chicago to complete his postdoctoral studies on a brand new project that would eventually become his life’s work—the study of bacteria.

In 2004, Dr. Ton-That was offered a professorship position at the University of Connecticut Health Center teaching medical and graduate students. It was at UCONN where he delved deeper into his work and started to explore how the surface of bacteria helps it attach to host tissues. It was also at UCONN where he received his first R01 grant—a commonly used funding mechanism from the National Institutes of Health. To date, Dr. Ton-That has successfully renewed his R01 grant twice for a total of 14 years.

Dr. Ton-That’s work took him to the University of Texas McGovern Medical School, where he made a home for almost 10 years until UCLA came calling. He plans to continue his research on oral bacteria’s role in periodontitis and examining how dental plaque forms. He also plans to expand his research and develop therapies to prevent staph infections and explore how certain oral bacteria promote colorectal cancer and pre-term birth. Work in his lab is currently supported by three R01 grants.

“I’m excited to expand my research program into areas that I’ve never explored before, and I owe a lot of my success to Dr. Schneewind,” he said. “When you get to a certain point in your career, there’s a sense of freedom. I feel I’ve finally reached that point. UCLA is an exciting place—where the thrill of discovery abounds in every corner.”



“UCLA is an exciting place—where the thrill of discovery abounds in every corner.”

Dr. Hung Ton-That '96, PhD '00

*Professor of Oral Biology &
Two-time UCLA Alum*

PUTTING GUARDS IN PLACE

Volunteer faculty makes a career of guarding athletes' teeth

If you asked **Dr. Ray Padilla** what drives him to volunteer his time and clinical expertise year-after-year, game after-game to one of the best collegiate sports enterprises in the country, UCLA Athletics, and two professional teams, the LA Lakers and the LA Galaxy, he would say it's because he's passionate about treating some of the best college and professional athletes in Los Angeles and being part of the exciting world of sports.

As one of only a handful of dentists in the country who focuses on sports dentistry, Dr. Padilla, who is a volunteer faculty member in the section of restorative dentistry, is among an even smaller group who teach it. He frequently speaks at dental conventions around the country on sports-related dental trauma and has authored numerous publications on the topic. To top off his impressive resume, he has built a successful general practice in the South Bay.

Dr. Padilla's road to sports dentistry started over 30 years ago when he was asked to be on the dental services team for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. At the time, Dr. Padilla was just hitting his stride in private practice, but those Olympic Games would change his life forever. They ignited a passion of working with and treating elite athletes for dental trauma.

"I fell in love with sports dentistry after the '84 Olympics. The excitement of being part of competitive sports is indescribable," said Padilla. "We would treat athletes from around the world many for basic oral hygiene, because they didn't have adequate access to proper dental care in their own countries. There would be a full hospital setting in the Olympic Village and we would clock more than 2,000 dental visits for the entirety of the games."

Following the Olympics, Dr. Padilla was asked to be the dental director for soccer's 1994 World Cup, which he followed up with servicing the '99 and the '03 World Cups. He also served on a committee that oversaw doping control for the 2014 World Hockey Championships as well as being a volunteer venue dentist for the 2015 Los Angeles Special Olympics.

All of these high profile appointments aside, Dr. Padilla's most fulfilling role yet is his UCLA volunteer faculty position. In 1995, he was asked by Dr. Alan Felsenfeld to teach a course on dental trauma to young, aspiring dentists and residents. Notably, UCLA is one of the few dental schools that offers a course on dental trauma with an emphasis on sports injuries. In fact, the dental school is in the process of starting a sports dentistry club for their dental students with Dr. Padilla as their faculty advisor.

"Dental trauma, such as getting a tooth knocked out, can affect someone for the rest of their life. Implants may be needed and if left untreated, the tooth would discolor," said Dr. Padilla. "It's important for today's dental educators to teach the correct protocol for treating serious injuries of the mouth."



Photo: UCLA Health

Dr. Ray Padilla

Volunteer Faculty, Dental Trauma Expert & Private Practice Owner

Dr. Padilla instills that same awareness of dental trauma in his patients and the players he treats. "A custom-fitted mouth guard is the best way of protecting one's self from getting a tooth loosened or knocked out and doing serious damage.

With my position with UCLA Athletics for the past 24 years, we make sure that athletes, across all sports, have the opportunity to wear custom-fitted mouth guards."

Sports Dentistry, including the treatment and prevention of dental trauma, brings together all specialties of dentistry as well as orthopedic and primary care physicians who can recognize and treat head injuries. Like many health care professionals, Dr. Padilla relies heavily on the collaboration of

his medical counterparts to provide the best possible care he can to the athletes.

"I tell my students who are interested in sports dentistry that they have to put in the time and gain more experience in trauma," said Dr. Padilla. **"Shadow a dentist that does this type of work, volunteer with a high school athletics department, and take continuing education courses. There are so many ways to expand your expertise of dental trauma and sports dentistry. And I promise you—you won't regret your decision."**

405 Hilgard Avenue
Box 951668, Room 53-068 CHS
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