

Oakland Tribune, The (CA)

Doctor helps students face a future in medicine

July 5, 2009

Section: My Town

Katherine Jarvis Oakland Tribune

Besides the support of his family, Dr. **Tomás Magaña** had few mentors to guide him toward a career in medicine. Nine years ago, he created a program so high school students planning to pursue a health care career won't experience the same isolation.

Last month in Los Angeles, the California Wellness Foundation awarded Magaña the "Champions of Health Professions Diversity" award for his work with FACES for the Future, which helps disadvantaged high school students achieve their goals in the medical field. He said he will help support his two sons' educational goals with the \$25,000 he received.

Magaña is a pediatrician at Children's Hospital Oakland, where he focuses on adolescent health. He is also the medical director for the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center. "They are a segment of the population that don't get the guidance they need, which is why I choose to work with them," he said.

In 2000, he cofounded FACES for the Future, a forum for adolescent advocacy and community education. His cofounder, Dr. Barbara Staggers, has been a leader in adolescent health at Children's Hospital and an adviser for the program. Magaña runs the program through Children's Hospital, where students begin midway through their sophomore year of high school and finish when they graduate.

Each year, FACES only accepts 30 to 35 students out of about 70 applicants because the success of the students relies on being able to focus on them, which becomes more difficult as the group gets larger, Magaña said. Students who are not accepted into the program are directed to other services and information.

Latino, African-American, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander and Native American high school students from Berkeley, Oakland Technical, Life Academy, Skyline, MetWest and Emiliano Zapata Street Academy attend the program. Magaña said the students are resilient, a trait they all share.

Magaña, 44, has expanded the program to St. Rose's Hospital in Hayward and started programs in San Diego and El Centro in Southern California. He said he would like to see the program throughout the state.

It became clear to Magaña when he was finishing medical school at UC San Francisco that the health care work force did not represent the communities it was serving, he said. Providers who understand the complexities of the patient population they serve are more likely to give care that is culturally competent and sensitive, he said.

He wants more high school students from different backgrounds to get into health care, learn how to get started and find out what options are available. FACES for the Future also focuses on the students' psychosocial health and other opportunities for growth. "We focus on the whole student, the whole person," Magaña said.

The seeds were planted for Magaña's medical career when he was 15 and went to Honduras for four weeks as part of the Amigos de las Americas program. While in Honduras, he volunteered to help out with dental hygiene and polio vaccinations. "It redshifted my view of the world," he said.

Magaña was raised by a single mother in East Los Angeles, where he witnessed poverty. But when he was in Honduras, he saw extreme examples of poverty; many children did not know how to brush their teeth and many didn't have access to the polio vaccine. "It was a great opportunity to be of service to people who otherwise have no access or resources," he said.

His family made many sacrifices for him to continue his education because they knew it was important. He went to Cornell University in New York where he received a bachelor's degree in biology in 1986 and returned to California to go to UC Berkeley, where he earned his master's degree in endocrinology in 1990. He received his medical degree from UC San Francisco in 1995.

He said it was challenging for him as a Latino to get into the medical profession because he had few mentors to tell him how to avoid the obstacles he might face in school. Though the FACES program focuses on high school students, it continues to help them once they are in college.

Receiving the "Champions of Health Professions Diversity" award honors everyone involved with the FACES program, especially the young people who have gone through the program with great success, Magaña said.

Linh Dao, who was in the first graduating class of FACES in 2003 and graduated from UC Berkeley in 2007, is the first student from the program who has been accepted to medical school. She will be attending the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA in the fall, where she said she wants to pursue a career as a surgeon, although she is keeping her options open.

Dao said without FACES she would not be as confident about wanting to go into medicine. She has always been interested in human anatomy, but she thinks she would have struggled without the support of FACES.

Reach Katherine Jarvis at 510-208-6425 or kjarvis@bayareanewsgroup.com.

Biography* NAME: Dr. Tomás Magaña* Age: 44* Occupation: Pediatrician* Education: Bachelor's, Biology, Cornell University, 1986; master's in Endocrinology, UC Berkeley, 1990; medical degree, UC San Francisco, 1995* Family: Wife Leticia Marquez-Magaña, 45, San Francisco State professor; two sons, 15 and 13