

Family Medicine

*Care and community are at the heart
of the student-run free clinic project.*

BY NICOLE MLYNARYK, MS '20

As the sun sinks into the ocean off San Diego's Pacific Beach neighborhood, the boardwalk begins to buzz with nightlife. Music pulses as crowds queue up outside bars and restaurants. But just blocks away, in the parking lot of a church, a different line starts to form.

For one night each week, a small church space is transformed into UC San Diego's Student-Run Free Clinic. What was once a storage closet is now a dentist's office. A folding table turns the hallway into a pharmacy. Clinic headquarters are housed in the daycare room, where staff members manage spreadsheets from kid-sized tables and chairs.

This site is one of several free clinic locations in San Diego County where medical students and faculty treat

marginalized communities at no cost. Once the doors open, patients are greeted by a team of doctors, dentists, pharmacists, therapists, lawyers and social workers. For hours into the night, staff members weave through the tight spaces with focus and urgency. Supplies and paperwork are shuttled from room to room. The busy scene can be intimidating at first to new medical students, but one figure in the crowd is always ready to help: Dr. Natalie Rodriguez '99, MD '05.

Rodriguez is the associate director of the UC San Diego School of Medicine's Student-Run Free Clinic Project. In these rooms, she seems to have an eye on everything and everyone. It's a warm, attentive gaze that says, "I see you. I've got you."



Small in stature but big in heart, Rodriguez serves as both a respected mentor and a cherished friend to all at the clinic. Students come to her with questions about clinical cases, coursework and careers. Patients, anxious to catch their bus home in time, are relieved to know she's remembered their routes and filled their prescriptions in advance. She manages to keep track of it all, providing calming comfort and infectious laughs along the way.

It came as no surprise then that Rodriguez was named the 2021 recipient of the Arnold P. Gold Foundation Humanism in Medicine Award from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). It's a national honor of compassionate care and mentorship, which her team believes she embodies to the fullest.

But after years of tending to those around her, the humble Rodriguez is still getting used to the recognition.

"I do what I do because I love it and I love our patients, and I would do it alone in a closet if no one ever saw me," says Rodriguez. "This is more than just my job; it really does speak to who I am as a person."

Rodriguez and the Student-Run Free Clinic are united in their mission to provide humanistic and holistic health care to all. "I try to treat my patients as a whole person," she says. In their conversations, she gets to know not only the patient's physical ailments, but also other factors that influence their health—things like their families, finances, language and culture.

"It all starts with the patient-physician relationship," she says. "We have to be open and authentic with each other. Once that safety and trust is established, that's when the best patient care happens."



NEXT GENERATION: With faculty supervision, students interview, examine, diagnose, treat and follow-up with patients.

Her work gives new meaning to the phrase "family medicine." In her 20 years at the clinic, Rodriguez's patients have invited her to numerous weddings and quinceañeras. She even treats some of the same families she met when first joining the clinic as a student volunteer in 2001.

Like many patients at the free clinic, the Quiñonez family did not have health insurance when they moved from Tijuana to San Diego. Sisters Carolina and Dulce were teenagers when their family found the clinic, and describe their first appointment as a "huge relief" after a long struggle to find care.

"When I met Dr. Rodriguez, I was suffering from heavy menstrual bleeding, vomiting and had lost a lot of weight," said Carolina Quiñonez. "She spoke to us in Spanish and was able to get me medication for a hormonal imbalance."

In addition to her hormone treatments, Carolina received acupuncture and dental services, and met with the bilingual psychologist during a bout of depression. She and her sister also benefited from the clinic's food security program, receiving a monthly package of fresh produce, eggs and dried goods to support their diet.



“Family is about feeling loved and supported, and having people to go to for help and advice—the free clinic has all of that.”

— JINHO JUNG '18, FLOOR MANAGER AT THE PACIFIC BEACH CLINIC

As the years went on and the sisters grew up, the clinic’s social worker helped them both prepare college applications for UC San Diego. Thanks to financial assistance from the Chancellor’s Associates Scholarship Program (CASP), Carolina graduated in 2021 with a degree in anthropology from UC San Diego’s Muir College. Her sister, Dulce, is set to graduate later this year.

“I want to thank Dr. Rodriguez for being so kind to us, making us so comfortable, and getting us the resources we needed,” said Carolina Quiñonez ’21. “My family is so grateful to her and the clinic.”

Community and camaraderie have been cornerstones of the free clinic culture since its early days. The training model has fourth-year medical students coaching first-years, with physicians overseeing every group. But mentors and mentees feel more like teammates here, and they all sit in those kid-sized chairs.

This dynamic is a refreshing change from the formal hierarchy and structure the students spend most of their time in. The first years of medical school can be intensely challenging, especially for students who are struggling to feel a sense of



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LEADERSHIP

Dr. Ellen Beck
Founding Director

Dr. Michelle Johnson, MD '03
Director

Dr. Natalie Rodriguez,
'99, MD '05, Associate Director

LOCATIONS

- Pacific Beach
- Downtown San Diego
- Veterans Village of San Diego
- Lemon Grove
- Normal Heights

BY THE NUMBERS (2021)

Medical visits: 4,000

Dental visits: 750

Free prescriptions: 32,000

Hours of psychotherapy: 570

COVID-19 vaccinations: 490



NOT EXACTLY CHILD’S PLAY: The daycare of a Pacific Beach church is transformed into a fully functioning clinic space providing an invaluable clinical experience for medical students.



belonging in their new environment. For many medical students, Rodriguez and the clinic have become a new home away from home.

“As an LGBT, first-generation, and Native American medical student from a rural community, it can be difficult to find mentors that will take the time to understand issues through my own lens,” says Paul Michael Acosta II, a second-year medical student and free clinic volunteer. “I specifically remember my struggles with moving across the country and losing all the community I knew when I came to UC San Diego. Dr. Rodriguez not only opened her home to me for meals but provided me the comfort of

a support system, and I truly do not know if I would have been able to deal with the isolation I felt without her.”

Rodriguez’s drive to support students through their academic journeys is inspired by her own early struggles to break into the field. She enjoyed school and always dreamed of being a doctor, but was faced with new obstacles when she became an undergraduate at UC San Diego.

“I was not prepared for the challenges of college, and as supportive as my family was, they didn’t know how to guide me through that experience,” says Rodriguez. Her parents, who

emigrated from Cuba to Los Angeles, had not been to college themselves.

The prevailing notion among students at the time was that if you didn’t have perfect grades, you wouldn’t get into medical school. A discouraged Rodriguez tried exploring other career paths and alternate routes into health care, but couldn’t shake her desire to become a physician. She decided to enroll in UC San Diego’s Post Baccalaureate Premedical Program, where she was first introduced to the Student-Run Free Clinic.

AT THE ROUND TABLE: Dr. Natalie Rodriguez, '99, MD '05 (left) reviews the rundown board for the evening with a group of medical students, while others fill patient prescriptions.

“This place sustained me,” says Rodriguez. “I met patients that reminded me of my grandma, and physicians who were serving the kinds of communities I wanted to serve. I was offered support that I couldn’t find elsewhere, and it cemented my heart to the free clinic.”

Rodriguez was later accepted into UC San Diego School of Medicine, where she now teaches students as an associate clinical professor. Her philosophy has inspired many students to serve their own communities after medical school. For example, Acosta II is now a member of the PRIME-Health Equity program at the medical school, which trains students to address health disparities. He plans to use his degree to improve health care access in Native American communities like his own.



SPOTLIGHT ON

Dr. Sussi Yamaguchi, '03

Dr. Sussi Yamaguchi first volunteered at the free clinic as an undergraduate at UC San Diego.

“I was shadowing a dentist at this very clinic when he provided dentures to a homeless patient. The patient was so happy and kept hugging his dentist, and I thought, ‘I want to do that when I finish dental school,’” she says.

For the last 16 years, Yamaguchi has served as the dental clinical director at the clinic. She typically sees five patients a night, often treating cases of cavities and tooth loss.

“Dental care is so expensive, but oral health is an important part of overall health,” she says. “We also recognize that a person’s smile can contribute to their socioeconomic success, so it’s been really meaningful to help our patients receive these services. I still get that warm, fuzzy feeling every night I’m here.”

ALL SMILES: The dental team, led by Dr. Sussi Yamaguchi '03, offers free dental care for patients who do not qualify for other healthcare programs or resources.



As the free clinic continues to treat patients and train the next generation of health professionals, Rodriguez is starting to set her sights on its future.

“We couldn’t do what we do without the support of local donors, community partners and medical volunteers,” she says. But beyond the ongoing needs for services and supplies, Rodriguez says the ultimate dream is to open a dedicated free clinic facility—one with a patient waiting room, private exam rooms, and expanded specialty services. Rodriguez hopes the recent recognition from the AAMC will help inspire further support for these goals.

“This award isn’t just a win for me—it’s a win for the patients and students, too. It’s a recognition that this work, this mission and these people all matter. I see it as inspiration to do more and greater things.”

Learn more about UC San Diego’s Student-Run Free Clinic Project at tritonmag.com/freeclinic

