Planting the Seeds

Students at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine aren’t the only ones to benefit from Ann-Gel Palermo’s vision of a new way to train doctors.

It’s easy to miss East Harlem. Tucked in the top right-hand corner of Manhattan, just north of the Upper East Side, the neighborhood covers a little more than two square miles and holds fewer than 118,000 residents—a tiny share of New York City’s eight million inhabitants. Most of the people who live in East Harlem are Latino or black, and nearly 40 percent of them are poor. It’s a part of New York that tourists seldom visit. Asthma rates here are three times higher than in the rest of the city, the rate of drug addiction is twice as high, one in three East Harlem adults is obese, and a significant portion of the population lives with AIDS.

But at the same time, says Ann-Gel Palermo, MPH ’99, who has worked in East Harlem since 1999, “it has tremendous cultural richness.” Palermo knows firsthand. As associate director of operations at the Center for Multicultural and Community Affairs of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, which sits on the south border of East Harlem, just above the Upper East Side, it’s Palermo’s job to forge links between the school and the neighborhood it serves. “Our commitment is having our students and faculty treat the patient as community,” she says.

For the past two years, Palermo has taken Mt. Sinai’s first-year medical students on a walking tour of East Harlem. Because most students come from top-tier colleges and affluent families, and many are native New Yorkers who’ve never set foot in East Harlem, the tour can be an eye-opener. Palermo takes her students to botanica shops that cater to all kinds of physical, spiritual, and religious needs; bodegas where milk costs more than it does in bigger supermarkets; and cuchifrito stands that offer delicacies like empanadillas (fried meat-filled pastries) and baccelaito (fried codfish). She points out that fast food chains and liquor stores outnumber fresh fruit and vegetable purveyors. If students are to understand the patients they treat, they need to know how those patients live, Palermo says. “Part of what we’re committed to as a center is infusing a public health context in training and education.” Palermo admits, in fact, that her “personal agenda” with her students at Mt. Sinai “is to sprinkle them all with social and community concerns first and doctors next.” It’s a formula she’s adopted in her own life, both as associate director of the center and as a volunteer chair of the Harlem Community and Academic Partnership at the Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies at the New York Academy of Medicine.

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Though born in Spain to Puerto Rican parents who think of themselves as Nuyoricans, or Puerto Rican New Yorkers, Palermo grew up in Europe and upstate New York, thanks to her father’s career with the U.S. Air Force. She’s part of the first generation of her family to go to college and graduate school. As a high schooler, she planned to become a doctor, but after a stint at the University of Michigan School of Public Health as a student in the Summer Enrichment Program, Palermo turned with gusto to public health.

Her primary aim, though, is to help develop a new way of training doctors, one that fully incorporates public health principles and practice. “Ultimately, what’s formulating is a niche that aims to transform medical education and public health education into some sort of blended model,” she says. “I think we’d be generating extraordinary physicians—physicians who can relate to people, and in the end that’s what it’s really about.” She adds, “I think a movement can happen. I really believe in being able to plant the seeds of a movement.”

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