

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—

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

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 per cent of them are poor.



As a student speaker at the 1999 SPH convocation, Ann-Gel Palermo, left, told her classmates, "As alumni and now novice public health professionals, we must set new trends that update and transform the traditional beliefs and practices of public health."

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-rate 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 to the south; and *cuchifrito* stands that offer delicacies like *empanadillas* (fried

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meat-filled pastries) and *bacclaito* (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 public health 'best,' so that they will see themselves as public health practition-

ers 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.

"I saw it as a perfect match for both my biology and sociology interests," she remembers. "It just made sense."

Convinced that "policy is where we make the difference," Palermo enrolled in Michigan's Department of Health Management and Policy in 1997. During her two years at Michigan she became deeply involved with community-based public health, particularly Latino health. Shortly after graduation, she landed a job at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine through Michigan's alumni network, and she's been there ever since.

In addition to devising new ways to train and develop medical students at Mt. Sinai, Palermo has introduced faculty initiatives designed to foster diversity, and she's working to create both a fully integrated cross-cultural curriculum and a minority health research agenda. She plans to get her doctorate in public health before long.

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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Palermo launched her East Harlem tours two years ago.