

MUHS

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Carlos Torres '06: From Mexico to med school

Success stories of six young MUHS grads

Success Stories of MUHS financial aid recipients



FEATURES

Although **Carlos Torres '06**, **Andrew Bender '05**, **John Bender '08**, **Teng Yang '07**, **Eric Wolffersdorff '07** and **Karl Sona '09** come from different backgrounds, these young men all received financial aid to attend Marquette University High School. Now, years later, these aspiring professionals are making a name for themselves not only in their field of study, but with those they serve.

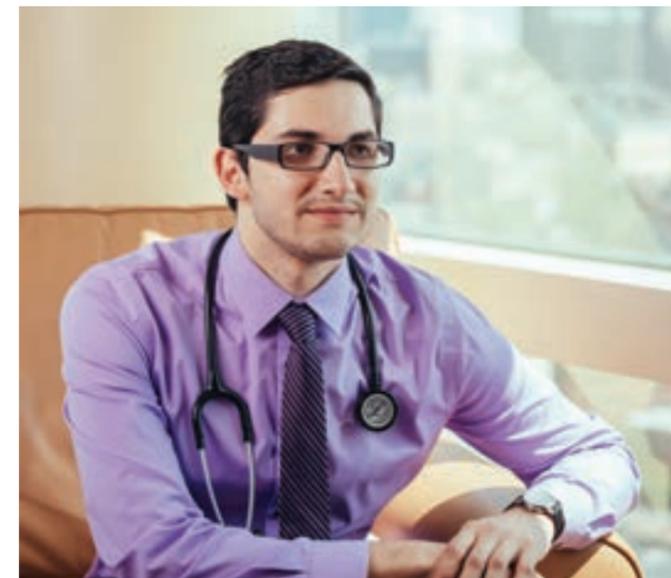
DR. CARLOS TORRES '06 FROM MEXICO TO MED SCHOOL

Julie Felser

As a third-year Harvard Medical School student, Carlos Torres '06 was on his final pediatrics rotation at Boston Children's Hospital when a 4-year-old girl was airlifted in after being mauled in Bolivia by four Rottweiler dogs. "It was very traumatic," Torres says.

The girl, whose story received national attention, arrived at the hospital to receive extensive medical care and reconstructive plastic surgery not available in her home country. But once she was stabilized Torres spent more time with the girl's Bolivian father, who was distraught by his daughter's condition and overwhelmed by the language and cultural barriers he faced in an American hospital.

Torres felt great compassion for the girl's father, too. "I saw my family in that father so treating him how I would want my family to be treated was really important," he says. "Even though the girl was the patient, I felt we had to do more for the dad than the girl on many levels," he says.



Dr. Carlos Torres '06 treats five-day-old baby Sophia for a mild fever. Torres is completing his pediatric residency at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Photo by Joseph Ferraro

This experience, along with many others he had at Boston Children's Hospital, led Torres to pursue pediatric medicine. "I really like the partnership you have with the parents. The parents many times become the advocate for the child and I love that," Torres says. "And, babies are really cute. Many of the kids remind me of my nieces and nephews," he adds with a laugh.

Torres graduated from Harvard Medical School in May and is now completing his residency in pediatrics at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children in Boston.

While the promising young doctor could boast about receiving his medical degree from one of America's most prestigious universities, Torres instead exudes humility, compassion and a genuine care for others.

"He is so aware of others," says **Larry Siewert '59**, former MUHS principal and Nativity Jesuit Middle School administrator who met and mentored Torres at Nativity. "There is never a time when I have talked with him or exchanged emails when he doesn't ask about how I am or my wife is doing. He is very sincerely interested in other people."

While Torres' character and actions personify Marquette High's ideals of a man for others, his life story exemplifies the American Dream.

The youngest of 10 children, Torres was born in a small farming town in Buenavista, Mexico. His parents and siblings worked hard on their farm, growing corn and raising livestock. Despite their efforts, the farm didn't generate enough income to support the family, so Torres' father, Agustin, became a migrant worker, picking crops in California a few months of the year during the '60s, '70s and '80s.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 allowed Agustin to apply for residency in America for him and his family. Eight years later, they finally received their green cards and, with the exception of three of Carlos' sisters, the family eventually moved to Milwaukee to be close to relatives and seek employment.

At the time, Torres was 10 years old when he arrived to his new home on 14th and Lincoln in Milwaukee. Unable to speak any English,

he started fifth grade at Forest Home Avenue School and was enrolled in the school’s English as a Second Language program.

The following year he applied to Nativity Jesuit High School. “When Carlos came to Nativity as a sixth-grader, he spoke very little English,” Siewert says. “We almost didn’t take him because of that.”

However, Torres began to flourish at his new middle school. “He was quiet and shy in the beginning. But shortly after he was there, it was clear that he was very bright and he did very well in classes,” Siewert says. “Other students quickly found out he was very bright and, because he was also very self-effacing, he was accepted and well liked.”

Siewert encouraged Torres to apply to Marquette High. “Carlos was the best in his class and we wanted him to get the full benefit of what MUHS offers,” he says. “Also, his family wanted him to attend [Marquette High] because it was the closest of the Catholic schools – an easy bus ride” from their home.

Torres looked at other Catholic high schools, however Marquette High was his first choice because it was the “most academically rigorous and I knew it would better prepare me for college,” he says. However, he did have concerns. “I felt at the time MUHS was a bit out of reach since my English wasn’t that great.”

He eventually came to MUHS and vividly recalls meeting MUHS faculty member **Al Taylor** in the library on the first day of school. Torres was sitting at a table, talking with new acquaintances during quiet-study time. “We had just gotten our IDs and within five minutes, they were confiscated [for talking]. We were terrified



Carlos Torres is joined at his graduation from Harvard Medical School by his family (from left to right: uncle Jose, sister Elena, brother Tori, sister Rosalinda, brother Jose, father Agustin, Torres '06, mother Pachita and brother Jorge.

we would never get them back,” he says, now able to laugh about the incident years later. “We didn’t know the rules, but Mr. Taylor was sure to remind us.”

Changing to a more serious tone, Torres shares the difficulties he experienced moving from Nativity to Marquette High. “It was one of the hardest transitions ever. More so than high school to college or college to med school,” he says.

“I think it was challenging for different reasons,” he says. “First, culturally. All the families at Nativity are Latino. At Marquette High, the majority of students were Caucasian. I felt I didn’t have much in common with my classmates. It made it hard to get to know them. And, it was very challenging academically. So, in the beginning I felt a little lonely.”

One of the first people Torres met was English teacher **Ann Downey**, who eventually became his advisor and helped him acclimate to his new academic environment. “She was always there to show me the ropes and give me advice and just talk, which was wonderful.”

Downey remembers Torres as “exceptionally gentle, especially for a high school boy. He also has an easy laugh and we would sit for whole periods talking about his family in Mexico,” she says. “Carlos was a very good student. He didn’t say much in class, but he was thoughtful and deep.”

Fluent in Spanish, Downey regularly communicated with Torres’ mother, Pachita, about his academic progress and would answer questions about MUHS. “She spoke many, many times to my mom in Spanish, which was so wonderful to hear. My mom just felt really comfortable with that.”

To his credit, Torres forced himself outside his comfort zone and into social events to make new friends. He attended football games, dances and other informal gatherings.

Slowly, he began to acclimate. “You could see Carlos growing on MUHS and MUHS growing on him,” Taylor says.

“He had great leadership qualities. He was always polite and always willing to help – he never said no.”

Torres joined the cross-country team, Orgullo Latino and eventually traveled to Quito, Ecuador, through the Somos Amigos program, which he described as “the best two weeks I had at Marquette High. I traveled with amazing people who loved working with others,” he says.



Photo by Joseph Ferraro

During his senior year, Torres helped his father pass the citizenship test, which meant he, too, was granted American citizenship.

Torres graduated from MUHS with a cumulative GPA just shy of a 4.0 and went on to attend UW–Madison, where he received a full-tuition scholarship as a Chancellor’s Scholar and Gates Millennium Scholar. In 2010, Torres graduated from UW–Madison Phi Beta Kappa with a 3.96 and a bachelor’s degree in psychology.

While at UW–Madison, Torres co-founded the Professional Association for Latinos for Medical School Access (PALMA) with Consuelo Lopez-Springfield, assistant dean of the College of Letters and Sciences, as a way to help Latino students connect with healthcare professionals and develop mentoring relationships.

Torres explains that many of his pre-med classmates had parents who were doctors or family connections in the medical field. “I didn’t have anyone I could talk to so I went to Dr. Lopez-Springfield, who was wonderful, and she shared some of these same feelings with me,” he says.

The pair worked together to set up guest speaker and panel events, professional shadowing opportunities, mentor-mentee relationships and fundraisers to help Latino students interested in medicine gain greater access to the healthcare field. They also helped to raise awareness of health issues affecting disadvantaged communities with an emphasis on the Latino community.

“Latino physicians from the community were interested in helping us out as well as non-Latino physicians who saw that representation of Latinos and other minority groups in medicine was very low,” he says. “We formed a nice, tight-knit community that is still around today.”

Torres applied to numerous medical schools, including Harvard, which he thought was a long shot. He not only was accepted to Harvard, but was also honored with a National Medical Fellowship Scholarship and the Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans.

Even while in medical school, Torres continued to serve the community. He co-founded and continues to serve as curriculum coordinator of Seeds of Hope, a program for middle and high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds to consider a career in the health sciences.

He also served as an HIV counselor and tester in a Spanish-speaking clinic, which he recalls as his favorite community service experience.

“I worked with awesome people who love their jobs. They are invested and passionate about helping others, especially those who are disenfranchised. It reminded me why I went into medicine.”

He also appreciated the autonomy of the experience and interacting with patients throughout the entire session, from collecting medical information and drawing blood to sharing the results and counseling the patient as needed. “It really made you feel like a health care provider,” he says.

Today, Torres is living in the moment and hasn’t made any firm plans for the future. He is looking forward to spending time with his family in Milwaukee and is uncertain if he will pursue a primary care pediatric practice or a specialty.

He does know he wants to be teaching. “I think that’s going to be an integral part of my career,” he says. He reflects fondly on his Jesuit education and describes his middle and high school teachers as “amazing. Their creativity and their passion is just so real. Even my teachers in medical school don’t compare.”

One thing is for certain, Torres is and will continue to change the lives of the children, and their parents, he meets.

Downey’s not surprised Torres is a pediatrician. “I knew he’d be a great doctor. When we were in Ecuador [on the Somos Amigos trip], Carlos was rocking babies and helping the little ones figure out how to use the toilet,” she says. “He would get down to the level of the children and speak with them eye to eye. He had a sincere compassion for the people he served. He’s just an exceptional young man.”