

Valerie Romero-Leggott, MD

HSHPS President

Vice Chancellor for Diversity, University of New Mexico (UNM) School of Medicine (SOM)

Professor of Family & Community Medicine, UNM SOM

Associate Dean for Diversity, UNM SOM

Executive Director, UNM SOM BA/MD Combined Degree Program

“Poverty and lack of education create disparities. We have got to start talking early on about careers that kids can pursue, what they can become, and what they can aspire to become. But it has to be affordable.”

For some people, pursuing a career in medicine begins at home - a parent, relative, or close family friend who inspires one to become a doctor. For others, the moment strikes when they shadow a doctor. Or maybe, a career in medicine is expected and there's no other option, at least as far as the parents are concerned. For HSHPS President Dr. Valerie Romero-Leggott, it began in the ninth grade. She had always like math and science and helping people.

“What could I do? What could I be? [Medicine] seemed to fit all those things that I liked,” she said.

Dr. Romero had no medical professions role models in her family and was the first generation in her family to go to college. She attended Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and found her role model in her primary care doctor after falling ill with a rheumatoid variant condition.

“Dr. Zaronki. I still remember him after 30-some years. So compassionate and knowledgeable - someone I really wanted to be like as a doctor.”

“Poverty and lack of education create disparities. We have got to start talking early on [in the educational pipeline] about careers that kids can pursue, what they can become, and what they can aspire to become. But it has to be affordable.”

Once Dr. Romero chose the medical path in college, she didn't think about anything else, only the courses she needed to take.

But, she said, “I began pre-med, but then really liked psychology and did not necessarily want to take as much science as was required in a science major. Something I always advise students: major in something you find interesting, are passionate about. Do not get major-based on thinking it is ‘the thing to do’ to get into medical school. You will do better in something you like, and will enjoy it more, too.”

The pull toward serving the underserved and promoting diversity in the health field stems from her humble childhood. She grew up in a loving home around family who instilled important cultural values and morals. “I might not have grown up in a monetarily wealthy family, but when you are a child, that doesn't matter,” she recalls.

It was not until she went to college that she realized the dramatic impact socioeconomic differences had on educational opportunities.

“Poverty and lack of education create disparities. We have got to start talking early on [in the educational pipeline] about careers that kids can pursue, what they can become, and what they can aspire to become. But it has to be affordable.”

Dr. Romero-Leggott's current work at the University of New Mexico revolves around recruiting and sustaining diverse and culturally enriching programs for future underrepresented and underserved health professionals. Most recently, her office received a \$2.2 million HRSA Health Careers Opportunity Grant along with a one year supplement for a Mental and Behavioral health pipeline. The foundations of these programs are the office's current partners and the values of a commitment to students, families, and communities at the center of the program; community based participatory programming; cross-cultural awareness and multicultural enrichment; service learning; asset-based programming; and identity, language, culture, and communities.

The work speaks for itself.

"I experienced what many of my patients go through. These experiences instill in you a desire and passion to make things better for the next generation, for those who deserve equality and opportunities and will help us as a nation and world become a better place."