For this doctor, hope amidst fear is the best medicine

Yale UniversityYale University

Dr. Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa may not be able to cure his patients' brain cancer, but there is one thing that the internationally renowned neurosurgeon and neuroscientist can provide them with: hope.

During a recent visit to campus Quiñones-Hinojosa discussed his journey from a migrant farm worker to a doctor who researches the deadliest form of brain cancer, gliobastomas. His talk was sponsored by La Casa Cultural Center, the Latino Cultural Center at Yale.

Quiñones-Hinojosa, who grew up during the economic depression in the 1980s, started working in his father's gas station at the age of 5. By the age of 14 he was a migrant farm worker in the San Jaoquin Valley. Quiñones-Hinojosa eventually returned to Mexicali to finish school and came back to the United States in 1987 at the age of 19, working as a cotton picker, painter, and welder while living alone in a trailer.

"When I came to the United States I wanted two things: a pair of pink Ray-Bans and a pair of high-top leather Nike shoes," joked Quiñones-Hinojosa to the large audience.

Quiñones-Hinojosa — who lists migrant farm worker on his curriculum vitae —

received a medical degree from Harvard University, graduating *cum laude*. He went on to complete his residency in neurosurgery at the University of California-San Francisco, where he also held a postdoctoral fellowship in developmental and stem cell biology. Today Quiñones-Hinojosa is a professor of neurosurgery and oncology, neuroscience, and cellular and molecular medicine at Johns Hopkins. In addition to directing the Brain Tumor Surgery Program at Johns Hopkins Bayview Hospital, and the Pituitary Surgery Program at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Quiñones-Hinojosa leads the Brain Tumor Stem Cell Laboratory.

“The odds are overwhelmingly against me succeeding in this field as far as finding a cure or a better way to treat brain cancer. But so were the chances of me sitting here with you today, when I came to this country in 1987,” said Quiñones-Hinojosa, who became a U.S. citizen in 1997.

The doctor performs 250 surgeries a year, and, even when faced with the most grim prognoses, strives to “give my patients something that is more powerful than fear: I give them hope.”

Quiñones-Hinojosa commented that one of the most difficult parts of his profession is not the brain surgery itself. “The most difficult thing is the emotional connection that I form with my patients.”

The neurosurgeon told his audience about a patient whom he operated on during his residency. The young man — also the son of migrant farm workers — was a student at the University of California-Berkeley. Despite his best efforts, he was not able to save his life. “His tumor took not only his life, but the hope of his parents and siblings,” said Quiñones-Hinojosa, noting, “I poured my soul into saving his life. His death took a big toll on my life.”

“I can’t believe that such a beautiful organ like the human brain can have and house what I consider to be the most devastating cancer in the world, which is a glioblastoma,” commented the neurosurgeon, who added that he believes it is his duty is to train the future generations of brain surgeons. “I know that I will never have a significant impact on brain cancer, but I hope my students will.

“One day we will find a cure. And I live with that hope every single day, every single minute and every single hour.”

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