

FROM THE COVER

Journey from poverty to prominence

SURGEON [From Page 1A]

I've ever heard of anyone becoming a brain surgeon."

Quiñones does not see his experience as an example for either side in the contentious battle between those who want to tighten U.S. borders and those who want to give illegal immigrants a path to legal residency. He has no pat solution, he says, for the nation's immigration problems.

Born and raised outside Mexicali in the Mexican state of Baja California, Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa was the oldest of five children, and he started working as a boy at his father's dusty, one-pump gas station.

One of his clearest recollections comes from his 11th year, when his father — beset by financial problems — lost his gas station and cried in front of his son. "I remember what it was like to live through that, and I was never going to go back to that again," Quiñones said.

He also recalls, more vaguely, the funeral of a baby sister who died from persistent diarrhea when Quiñones was 3 — a period when the whole family was living in a couple of rooms behind the station. "I remember all my relatives were crowded into this one room, and there was a tremendous sadness," he said.

For the most part, though, friends and relatives remember Quiñones as an optimistic young man who radiated confidence and warmth. "Ever since we were in elementary school, he was always one of the most popular kids around. It's the way he carries himself with other people," says his brother, Gabriel Quiñones-Hinojosa, 37, who sells and repairs cell phones in San Diego.

Alfredo attended local schools and earned a certificate in 1986 from the Escuela Normal Urbana Federal Fronteriza in Mexicali, a four-year school for prospective teachers where he enrolled at age 14. He taught for a year, but the genteel poverty of a teaching career didn't appeal to him.

"If you become a teacher in Mexico and you don't have any political connections, they'll put you in a school out in the country somewhere that's nowhere near your home, and you'll stay there. That's what Alfredo faced," his brother said.

Said Alfredo: "In countries like Mexico, there's still such a bifurcation of classes, you have to be wealthy to begin with to move up at all."

So one day he hopped a chain-link fence not far from his home, made his way to Fresno and started picking fruit and vegetables in California's hot, fertile Central Valley.

"I came with the idea of making a lot of money and going back, but I abandoned that idea after I saw the opportunities here for being able to achieve what you set out to achieve — and helping people at the same time," he said.

Nor was the United States entirely foreign. The Quiñones children had visited the U.S. with their parents on trips to buy supplies for a small store they operated. They also visited relatives who had settled in California during the 1960s and 1970s.

Still, for a 19-year-old illegal migrant, that first full year in the U.S. was a lonely one. At one point, a friend from Mexico told Quiñones he'd never be anything but a fruit-picker.

"I refused to believe that was going to be my future," he said, "but it made me realize how powerful a self-fulfilling prophecy can be."

Quiñones moved on to Stockton, Calif., and enrolled at San Joaquin Delta College, a community college where he took English classes along with a regular course load. This time, he supported himself working as a welder and eventually as a crew leader for California Railcar Repair.

One day, as he exercised an injured knee in the college swimming pool, he spotted Anna Peterson, an education major from Minnesota who was a member of the school swim team.

They became friends, and then started dating a few years later.

"I knew right away she was the one," he recalled. "But at the time I was working at the railroad company and going to school, and she seemed so beyond everything I had."

Meanwhile, Quiñones' was turning into a top student — with grades high enough to win a scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley. Instead of picking produce or welding, he could now support himself by tutoring students in physics and chemistry.

In his senior year, Quiñones thought about law school but instead decided to follow the footsteps of his grandmother — a *curandera*, or healer, in Mexico — because of the effect she and her husband had on people's lives.

"She and my grandfather were greatly respected in their community. Everyone looked up to them because of the way they conducted themselves," he said. "I wanted to be like that — to have that personal touch with people."

Initially, he looked no further than California medical schools. Then a faculty adviser noticed his near-perfect grade point average, his work as a tutor and his volunteer efforts with Latino students. "He said, 'With this you could get into Harvard.' It was the first time it occurred to me," Quiñones recalled.

Indeed, he was admitted to Harvard Medical School in 1994 and spent five years in Boston, where he not only studied medicine, but married Anna and became a U.S. citizen.

In particular, Quiñones benefited from the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. It granted temporary and permanent residency status — or green cards — to roughly 2.7 million illegal immigrants, many of them farmworkers in California.

Quiñones at first received temporary residency status, allowing

him to work legally in the U.S. A few years later — while he was at Berkeley — he got his green card. By the time he applied for citizenship in 1997, he was in his second year at Harvard Medical School, spoke fluent English and had letters of recommendation from two members of the Harvard faculty.

As a result, the immigration agents who handled his case did not require him to take the written U.S. civics and history test required of most applicants — a test many immigrants fail.

He said he still feels a bit guilty about the preference he so obviously received because he was in medical school at Harvard. But he's proud of being a citizen.

"I feel so lucky to be where I am today. This country thrives on people who work hard. It'll give back what you give up-front," he said.

He does not propose a wholesale opening of U.S. borders, but he said he wants to see economic reform in Mexico and Latin America that would reduce the pressure to emigrate.

"We need to make sure conditions improve for the countries that are our neighbors, which is the root of these immigration issues," he said. "You cannot blame Mexico or the United States, it goes both ways."

As a physician, Quiñones completed his neurosurgical residency at the University of California, San Francisco, and arrived at Hopkins 15 months ago. He has settled in Bel Air with his wife and three children, ages 7, 5, and 1.

Quiñones operates three to five times a week — a typical workload for Hopkins neurosurgical faculty member. He spends much of the rest of his time consulting on other cases, seeing surgical patients and supervising seven graduate research assistants during days that typically stretch to 14 hours.

"He has got a work ethic unlike anything I've ever seen, in all my years as a neurosurgeon,"

said Dr. Mitchel S. Berger, a 21-year veteran of the specialty and chief of neurosurgery at UCSF.

Says Quiñones: "I think if I told a psychiatrist about myself, he'd probably say I was hyperactive. But I can't help it. I want to get things done, and I always feel like there's something more I want to do."

Quiñones' research focuses on cancer stem cells, a specialty he's been studying since early in his residency at UCSF. His goal is practical, he says — to make brain cancer a chronic disease like HIV, a condition that people can live with for decades instead of a remorseless killer.

"I tell people I'm not here to find cures for brain cancer. I'm here to make lives better," he said.

He has trouble quantifying how his approach to medicine may differ from doctors with more traditional, middle-class backgrounds. "When I see a patient," he said, "I remember what it was like to be on that side of the picture, to not have money, to be ostracized, to not speak the language. That's all a part of me."

Along with photos of his family, two Aztec calendars and a set of clay water jugs, he keeps reminders of his past in his office — including digital photographs of the fence that he jumped to enter the U.S., the trailer where he first lived and his father's gas station.

"I'm basically the same person I was back then," he said. "I'm older and I look older, but I really haven't changed."

In June, Quiñones won a \$150,000 grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, most of which he plans spend on an optical microscope capable of time-lapse images that can track the migration patterns of neural and brain cancer stem cells.

Last month, he was inducted into an alumni hall of fame organized by the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, a group that gathers

private donations to provide financial aid to college-bound Latinos.

Twenty Latinos in the U.S. have been so honored. They include U.S. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona, Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzalez and Antonio Oscar Garza Jr. the U.S. ambassador to Mexico.

Quiñones has returned to Mexico only a few times since he arrived — and the only extensive trip was to a medical conference in July. But he wants to go back with his family soon. "I want to show them where I grew up, where I first lived when I came to this country and the fence I came over to get here. I think it's important that they see that," he said.

Meanwhile, back in the operating room at Bayview, Quiñones and Dr. James Frazier, a Hopkins neurosurgical resident, open a circular portion of Robert Hawkins' skull. This is the moment Quiñones lives for — the privilege of entering what he calls the sanctuary of the brain.

"Can you conceive of a more intimate moment than putting your hands in someone's brain? You have the ability to change their future, the ability to change their memories or their ability to speak or to move," he said. "I always think about the patient and ask myself, 'What if it was my son? Or what if it was me?'"

Good news: The tumor is benign and reachable. Slowly, painstakingly, over four hours, Quiñones and Frazier remove the mass, one tiny portion at a time. A few days later, a grateful Hawkins is at home — with control over the left side of his body restored and orders from the doctor to restrict his exercise to the Stairmaster for a couple of weeks.

Outcomes like these, Quiñones says, make his long journey worth the effort. "I get a great deal of satisfaction from what I do," he said. "I get to see my patients getting better, and they even thank me for it."

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