

Dean Goldschmidt's Interview with Dagoberto Garces, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Thursday, June 18, 2009

PJG: Thank you so much for coming here and for doing this.

DG: It's my pleasure.

PJG: Why don't you tell us how you grew up? How was your upbringing?

DG: I grew up in Cuba until I was 18 years old; then I came to this country in 1962 with two younger brothers who were 17 and 12 years old, probably we had Pedro Pan visas. When we arrived at the Miami Airport, some friend of my family took custody of us and that way we did not have to go to any of the encampments or be shipped out of the city or the state. After a week we went to Lubbock, Texas – that's in the middle of the Panhandle. Another friend of my family, who's a doctor, told us, "Come over here." We didn't have anything – no money, no jobs, nothing. We were there for five years, two of them by ourselves and then, my parents were able to join us. I made my living being a surgical tech, which was good enough. I started medical school in Cuba but then was kicked out of the school because of the revolution. My father was a surgeon, so I was working with my father as a surgical tech in Cuba. When I came here, I started working as a surgical tech. I could not speak English, but I could work because I knew my way around an operating room. Then I went to college at Texas Tech and in 1967, I went to medical school in Madrid, Spain.

PJG: Terrific.

DG: After medical school in Spain, I came back and I went to Charity Hospital in New Orleans, where I did a year of internship. Then I came to Mount Sinai in Miami Beach, where I did four years of general surgery and one extra year of vascular surgery.

PJG: Unbelievable!

DG: It is.

PJG: Did you enjoy your medical school in Madrid?

DG: I was telling someone else that it probably was the best time of my life.

PJG: It has a very good reputation, as you know.

DG: Not only that, I think they have another perspective on life over there. I remember that when we finished class at 1 or 2 o'clock, we filled all the bars around the university, and it was probably the same in Belgium. So tapas, tapas, and beer and wine ... and then we would finish, go home for lunch and then come back if we had a lab or something like that. But I'm really glad you asked me that because I was telling someone else the other day, "The best years of my life were in medical school in Spain." I didn't have enough money, but I had a great time!

PJG: Yes, I know. The city of Madrid is really a great city. I went there many times and it's very vibrant. There's a lot of energy in that city.

DG: It's elegant ... elegant, vibrant, and big!

PJG: And they have the best lemonade in the world.

DG: I don't know about the best lemonade but they have the best wine and tapas – I can tell you that!

PJG: The amazing thing is that I was starting college in 1972 in Brussels, while you were finishing medical school, we were about 1,000 miles from each other and now we're here, 5,000 miles away ...

DG: That's right – incredible!

PJG: That's amazing. It's really a pleasure to have you in the UHealth family and I know what a wonderful job you're doing at UMH now. Tell us, in your career, what were the important

steps once you had finished medical school? I understand that you did the internship and then you had the opportunity with the four years at Mount Sinai to specialize in the area that has been your area of interest for a long time.

DG: Yes, a long time.

PJG: Since you had already worked with your dad, how did it feel for a kid that had to leave his country with family, but nothing else, to be able to re-establish your life in America after all that time that had passed, and live your original dream to some degree, right?

DG: I am really one of the many hundreds, many thousands of Cubans that did it and it was all done through hard work and commitment. I knew I wanted to be a doctor because I had been going into the operating room with my father since I was nine years old, just to watch. I knew I wanted to be a doctor and that was always on my mind, and no matter what, I kept looking forward. I thought, “If it’s not this year, it’s going to be next year” until I was able to go to Spain. I had been saving some money, but the school over there was cheaper than here, did you know that?

PJG: Oh yes, much cheaper!

DG: Much cheaper and I was able to go.

PJG: Did you have any family in Madrid?

DG: No.

PJG: So you went there alone?

DG: I heard from a friend when I was in Texas. We were together in high school in Cuba. He was living in Miami and he heard I was going to Spain. He called me and said, “I’m going too.” So we met in New York and went to Madrid together.

PJG: Fantastic. If Madrid was the best place in terms of lifestyle, at what institution did you most enjoy practicing?

DG: I think that when I came back and I went to Charity. It was a tremendous experience. Charity Hospital was a 3,000-bed hospital at that time.

PJG: Unbelievable.

DG: Nineteen floors, I believe, or 13 floors. I was amazed to see such a big institution like that – and I was part of it. First I was a little bit afraid, but that was really one of my best experiences when I finished medical school.

PJG: Another similarity between our two lives is that my father was a surgeon too.

DG: He was?

PJG: But I had to wait until I was 13 to get to the operating room.

DG: Well, my father owned a small hospital, that's why I was able to do it. Since my father owned the hospital, I was able to do whatever I wanted to there. As a matter of fact, I used to take my friends into the hospital and take care of their cuts, bruises and all that. At that time we used to use a lot of sulfa, remember that powder? I would put a little bit of powder, sulfa, dress it and you're fixed, ready to go.

PJG: And do you remember mercurochrome?

DG: Mercurochrome, of course.

PJG: And ether?

DG: Ether, mercurochrome ...

PJG: My father was working in a polyclinic and you would enter and it would just take over. I mean, it was amazing.

DG: Incredible.

PJG: Did you go with your dad when he was on call, or he wasn't on call because he was the boss?

DG: Well, people used to come to him. Remember, he owned the hospital.

PJG: Yes.

DG: We lived on top of the hospital. At night sometimes when I was around town and I heard he was doing surgery, I used to go. "What are you doing here?" he would ask. I would say, "I want to see."

PJG: That's wonderful. That's how I learned to play cards.

DG: Really?

PJG: When my father was on call and there was nothing to do, he would teach me to play cards. I haven't played cards since he passed away. Anyway, it's really a delight to have you working with us.

DG: Same, it's a pleasure.

PJG: I cannot tell you how pleased I am and how grateful I am for the work that you do. Did you make some friends with the folks from the UM team when they came aboard?

DG: I knew some of them before.

PJG: You knew Don Williams, right?

DG: I knew Mark Soloway because I participated in some of his cases. I knew Thomas Temple, I also participated in some of his cases before UM came over. Now I know a few more.

PJG: And you knew Don Williams from Mount Sinai, right?

DG: No. Remember, I haven't been in Sinai in decades.

PJG: OK. I didn't know exactly when he started.

DG: He started long after I left. I left in 1980 or 1979.

PJG: May I briefly ask you about your family?

DG: Sure. I met my wife in Madrid, Spain.

PJG: OK -- now I know why Madrid was the best time of your life!

DG: It was – it was a good time. I tell you what, I was broke that day; I think I had five dollars.

PJG: And she paid attention to you anyway?

DG: That was Christmas Eve, no, New Year's Eve and I went to a place where Cubans meet. It's called Centro Cubano de Madrid; it still exists. I said, "Well, what am I going to do. I have five dollars." I went over there—took a look over there and I said, "You want to have a drink?" And we've been together since then.

PJG: Amazing. Do you have kids?

DG: I have three kids.

PJG: Boys, girls?

DG: Yes, I'm sorry to tell you the boys are Gators.

PJG: OK, we can't always win!

DG: My first boy is a D.P.M., which means doctor of plant medicine. He was the first promotion out of UF in that. He has a master's in agriculture and a doctorate of plant medicine.

PJG: It's a very good agriculture school, by the way.

DG: Yes, it's excellent. He's got his own farm up close to St. Augustine, planting organic only and he also just got a position as a director of a program in Orlando, at a college over there, Valencia College.

PJG: Terrific!

DG: My daughter has a master's in education. She was doing counseling and after all these budget cuts, she's been out of work for a year. My third one is a boy; he went to medical school for one year and he said, "I'm sorry, this is not for me." I said, "Well, I'm glad you found out earlier." So, he's doing a master's in nutrition.

PJG: Terrific! You so wonderfully succeeded in America.

DG: We did.

PJG: We are proud of you and we are delighted to work with you, so keep up the good work!

DG: I'm delighted to work at UMH. All that we want from UM is respect – we respect you and you respect us. We can work together without any problems.

PJG: My father was in private practice and believe it or not, he always told me, "Never go to academia."

DG: You didn't listen to him that well.

PJG: He said, "It's a rat race." He said, "I hated it. You're never going to like it." Poor Daddy, if he only knew!

DG: It's got its pros and cons like everything else.

PJG: I think the beautiful thing is that at the end of it, we're all physicians and we want the same thing, which is that patients do well.

DG: The most important thing is to be happy with what you're doing and that you are doing it well.

PJG: Exactly.

DG: If you're not happy, it is a disaster.

PJG: I totally agree. Well listen, thanks again for doing this. It means a lot to me.

DG: You're welcome.

PJG: Great to see you. Keep up the good work!