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I Was Raised by the Ocean

When people think of Long Island, New York, they always think of the Hamptons and mansions near the ocean. Although I did live near the ocean, my neighborhood did not fit the preconceived notion of Long Island life.

I'm a first generation, Colombian-Salvadoran American. I come from a disadvantaged area where most of the neighborhood kids do not even finish high school. Instead of thinking about what colleges they want to go to, they are joining gangs, experimenting with drugs, or getting pregnant.

I knew not to stay out playing after dark since that was when the gang members would be out. I would hear about other kids getting shot or dying at family gatherings.

I despised the defeated attitude some of my family members had. They assumed that just because most of the people in my family were immigrants that did not finish high school, there was no other way of life. When I was only twelve, I promised myself that I was going to surpass what was expected of me.

I wanted to set an example and show people from my neighborhood that a Hispanic woman can become a role model. Having experienced living in a disadvan-

tagged neighborhood, I attained firsthand knowledge of what people in these areas go through in order to get medical attention. A lot of the people in my neighborhood were illegal immigrants and therefore had no insurance. Even some of the legal residents could not afford insurance. If people became sick they would go to certain bodegas and buy antibiotics that were bought in a Central American country like Mexico or El Salvador. I was curious about this and decided to investigate. One day I asked to see one of the packages of antibiotics. It was a shock to me to discover that they were not even meant for human consumption: they were for livestock. This saddened me because it let me know just how desperate some people are to get better when they have no other options. This further motivated me to do well in school.

I kept up with my schoolwork and did very well. I enrolled myself into summer reading programs, and did extra credit assignments for the teachers. In high school, instead of taking the easy electives, I signed up for extra science classes such as DNA Forensics. My teachers saw something in me and helped me look into summer research programs. I joined a program at Touro College in Bayshore, NY. I took trips to marshes and beaches to collect specimens. I spent the next three months studying the effects of microgravity on the growth and

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development of *Drosophila melanogaster*. All my hard work paid off in the end, since I was the first person in my family to go to college, at St. John's University.

During college, I did research in chemistry on pyridylporphyrin osmium (II) compounds. I found it so interesting that I ended up signing up for graduate classes in advanced chemistry. To pay for my graduate classes, I worked as an adjunct, teaching organic chemistry, quantitative analysis and general chemistry labs. I was also offered a part-time job teaching middle school kids. When I asked for more information I found out that most of the kids belonged to minority groups such as Hispanics and African-Americans. That really hit home, so I jumped at the chance to share my knowledge of chemistry with them. The program was called "Saturday Experience College Academy Program." It was designed to motivate kids to attend college one day and keep them out of trouble. Teaching such a diverse group of children allowed me to relate to different types of people by understanding the way they think. Teaching gave me the confidence to go for my doctorate in chemistry.

During my six years of graduate school, I taught general chemistry recitation and laboratories and "Science in the Environment" all while taking classes and conducting research. My research was aimed towards utilizing various types of macromolecular building blocks, based on branched DNA, as the basis for 3D structural designs. The impact of the research proposed is not limited to crystallographic applications, but also applicable in periodic positioning of molecules for nanoelectronics and drug delivery.

I have learned valuable time-management skills that will help me in life. I graduated in May 2016 from NYU with my PhD in chemistry. Currently, I am a postdoctoral fellow in the Seeman Lab working in DNA Nanotechnology and as a lab instructor.

Volunteering and shadowing doctors, however, helped me realize that I missed having contact with people. I want to be an advocate for disadvantaged individuals. Translating for patients and seeing the relief in their eyes that a Hispanic woman had made it this far further motivated me to seek a career in medicine. I thus decided to apply to medical school. Once again, all of my hard work paid off since I was accepted to SUNY Upstate Medical University. I am now part of the Class of 2021 and will begin my studies in Fall 2017.

Today, when I hear people talking about Long Island, I too think of beautiful beaches. However, I also remember those beaches as a menagerie of discovery in which my team and I collected specimens and how it opened the door to my career in the sciences. As a result I became the first person in my family to receive a doctorate degree. My experiences have helped me grow into the person I am today, someone who is dependable, hardworking and ready to be a physician.