

people of note



Elena Reyes in front of the Freedom Tower during her recent trip to Miami.

Saluting a lifetime of serving others

Miami's Freedom Tower is a place of memories for Elena Reyes. In the 1960s, when she was a child in Miami, Freedom Tower was an Ellis Island for Cuban refugees – people her family regularly provided with food and temporary shelter. It was also where her grandmother, a former immigrant, went for health care. Reyes went along as her interpreter, since few doctors spoke Spanish.

In October, Reyes returned to the Freedom Tower for the first time in more than 40 years. With Michelle Obama looking on, she received Florida Campus Compact's Service Learning Faculty Award for encouraging lifelong leadership among her students.

"It was really very moving," she said, "to think about going from being a kid that grew up in the pretty much blue-collar, working-class immigrant neighborhood to being there receiving an award from the first lady."

One of the College of Medicine's founding faculty members, Reyes now is the behavioral sciences curriculum director and an associate professor. She has been a major proponent of incorporating service opportunities into multiple courses. In the first-year doctoring course, for example, students spend three weeks shadowing a doctor in an underserved area. In the community medicine clerkship, third-year students work at community agencies to learn how to provide better care for patients.

Reyes also is faculty advisor for FSUCares, a medical student volunteer organization. Besides providing health care to locals in need, it makes annual service trips to Panama, the Texas-Mexico border and Immokalee.

"Our goal is to come back to Florida and better serve the patients here," she said. "It's very good to see where they come from and what the cultures are like there, so we can use that in providing their health care."

At the award ceremony, Obama praised the honorees' dedication to service, even in these tough times.

"She reinforced everyone's efforts to inspire a new generation of students to do service," Reyes said. "Not just something to do once a month, but rather have a life of service in what you do."