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Here's line on newest doc: She shatters barriers

By Tom Jackson



Vanessa Escobar recalls the lines and the waiting, but most of all she recalls watching the door, choking on anticipation. Anyone who used the state-directed clinics in Bogota, Colombia, learned the drill. At any moment, someone could emerge to declare they'd met their daily quota.

Go home, they would hear. Come back tomorrow.

Grasped for, the details scatter like minnows in a pond. But the sensations – frustration, humiliation, hopelessness – retain their ability to motivate, bringing us to this moment:

Saturday. Escobar queued up again. Anxious for the doctor to call her name.

Hear that? The doctor, the dean of Florida State University's College of Medicine, would see her now. She squared her shoulders, uncountable doors swinging wide.

The stroll to her diploma concluded a prolonged and unlikely journey involving culture shocks that revealed, not least of all, the mysteries of Southern cooking and the work hazards that land pole dancers in emergency rooms. (It turns out boots with fantastically high heels can produce epic cramps in unexpected places.)

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But as surely as she's learned to diagnose hypertension or hyperextensions in multiple languages, Escobar's odyssey traces to those devilish episodes in some otherwise forgotten Colombian clinic.

Looking back, the route is as bright as a line mapped on a GPS. That wasn't always the case. Her epiphany was comparatively late-breaking, her destiny tested by detours.

Among other things, she had to reject the allure of becoming the next Gabriella Sabatini, as well as the romantic notions of marine biology she shared with her snug circle of Zephyrhills High School friends.

But that's getting ahead of the story. First, she had to get to America.

Colombian expatriates Fernando and Alba Cecilia came to Florida seeking opportunity. Alas, soon after Vanessa was born, in 1983, they conceded they were, at last, geographically mismatched.

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Having earned citizenship with a two-year stint in the Army in 1965, Fernando planned to turn his Colombian dental school degree into a practice in America. He worked two jobs, studied for a license and never gave it a second thought. "The good things in life are difficult to get," he says.

In solitude, Alba Cecilia ached for home. She was going, she declared finally, accompanied by their tot. Fernando stayed, certain he was where he belonged.

A dozen years passed. Fernando became a dentist for the state Department of Corrections. Vanessa visited on school breaks. The sense of a custody swap grew inevitable. "I wanted to have a profession," Vanessa says. "That meant living in America with Poppy."

She was 13 when she came to stay, joining Fernando and his new bride, the loquacious Pamela Farr, PhD, a mental health counselor, Dade City native, daughter of citrus growers and born nurturer.

"The term 'step' just didn't fit our family," Pamela says. "But this was the dream step child. Thoughtful, compassionate, bright." One measure: Vanessa took to Pamela's daughter Meredith, afflicted with severe spina bifida, one sister to another.

Otherwise, this new life brought micro-misadventures. Unable to conjure "bullet" for an essay – she wrote "the thing that comes out of the end of a gun (*bala*)" – she landed a date with an English competency exam. Pamela chooses exactly the right phrase: "She blew it away."

Still, language vexations persisted. Pamela's mom, Ruth Farr, a daughter of the Deep South, confounded

Vanessa with her honeyed drawl and regional colloquialisms. And Southern-style vegetables occasionally brought the girl to tears – collard greens in particular.

She played tennis for the Bulldogs, satisfying an itch planted by Fernando, and not without notice, then moved on.

"There are lots of her father's traits in Vanessa," Pamela observes, "but athleticism isn't one of them." Fernando was – is – a stubbornly competitive athlete. Vanessa was merely stubborn. Sights set, she was unyielding.

Compiling service hours for high school graduation, she dabbled here and there. "But I would go to the hospitals," she says, "and it felt like home." Moreover, the emergency rooms – waiting rooms clogged with east Pasco's poor and uninsured, many of whom could not have blown away an English proficiency test – pointed her way forward.

Medicine was calling, and it was impatient. Conveniently, so was Vanessa. Grinding toward cum laude distinction at the University of South Florida, she proved useful as a translator for Spanish-only patients who crowded the Judeo Christian Health Clinic in the shadow of St. Joseph's Women's Hospital in Tampa.

They often arrived early, and waited without complaint. She thought of Bogota, calisthenics for her resolve: She would become a primary care physician, and spread her skills across generations of underserved families.

Vanessa's declarations on the matter commanded the attention of Paul McLeod, dean of the FSU College of Medicine's Pensacola campus. Having framed the college's outreach mission ideally, she'd earned the Campus Dean's Award.

McLeod remarked on the "twists and turns" of her journey, the many "forks in (her) road." She conquered will-crippling barriers to demonstrate "the strongest commitment to medicine that I have ever seen."

Three harrowing years of training lie ahead. Rotations. Sleep deprivation. Rounds. Dr. Escobar landed her first choice, Halifax Health Medical Center of Daytona Beach. She's ready – no, eager – to go.

Want to congratulate her for her barrier-shattering determination? Better hurry up and get in line.

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