

My Experiences as a Member of the First Graduating Class of Rutgers Medical School

BY LUIS VILLA JR., MMS '68, MD

Editor's Note:

Robert Wood Johnson Medical School (RWJMS) is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its founding. To mark the event, the RWJMS Retired Faculty Association invited Luis Villa Jr., MMS '68, MD, who graduated in the first class at Rutgers Medical School, to recollect his experiences as a student here. At its founding, the medical school offered a two-year program, and its graduates then completed their clinical studies at other medical schools. After graduating from Rutgers Medical School, he attended Harvard Medical School, where he received his MD degree.

It was 1965 and I had to make a decision whether to go to law school or apply for admission to medical school. This was colored by the previous four years, which had seen my parents and me arrive from Cuba with a total of \$15 and 40 pounds of luggage, the maximum allowed by the Castro government. My parents had made the difficult choice to face poverty and uncertainty in order to give me the opportunity to benefit from liberty and education in what they considered to be the best country in the world. A medical career offered economic security, intellectual challenge, and permanent employment.

After I interviewed at Rutgers Medical School, the choice was easy: only 16 students, a relatively large and distinguished faculty, brand-new facilities, scholarship aid, proximity to friends and family already in New Jersey, and very likely an interesting choice of schools to finish the clinical years.

I was definitely not disappointed. Dr. Stevens, who actually interviewed me, functioned not only as a microbiologist but as a friend, adviser, and part-time psychiatrist. Biochemistry with Dr. Plout opened for me new frontiers in the understanding of cellular function and

energy creation and transfer, while his partner, Dr. Shiga, exposed us to the Oriental philosophy regarding the ultimate purpose of molecular chemistry: "Most of your patients will live or die regardless of what you do." Dr. Schlesinger ("you don't know what a Dalton is?") and his team exposed us in detail to the marvels of molecular genetics. Dr. Morrison brought his famous autopsy buckets, which were pungent with the smell of formaldehyde but also invaluable in exposing us to the basics of pathology.

And then there was Dr. Stetten. He



COURTESY OF JUS VILIA, JR. MD

was, of course, the dean, but at least for me, he was also the father figure, the mentor. He was always available. He shared with us his meals, his family, his great stories about his years teaching biochemistry (“I thought Jimmy did not have it”), and his vision of what he thought the medical school should be and where we should follow up our studies.

Naturally, in the two years dedicated to the basic sciences, the emphasis was on the nonclinical aspects of medicine, and, although not enforced, it was clearly the expectation that at least some of

us would eventually pursue a career in academic medicine. Dr. Cross (“Shorty”) introduced us to actual patients in hospital settings and successfully provided the bridge from basic science to clinical medicine.

The student environment was very pleasant. As could be expected from a bunch of high achievers, there was some degree of competition, particularly when, even though we were assured of a successful transfer to a four-year school, it was not clear initially where we would eventually go and how the selection of students would take place.

There was mutual respect and acceptance of the inevitable peculiarities that became evident in such a small group of students: yes, liberals, progressives, Vietnam controversies, hard-liners. . . . I wonder how the others have changed.

We were all close, not only with one another but also with the faculty. There were frequent social events in which we mingled freely with the professors.

I fondly remember the prediction of the faculty that I would become a gynecologist. Well, that prediction was erroneous! I became a board-certified pathologist, a board-certified internist, and a board-certified hematologist and oncologist. I practiced both pathology and oncology/hematology until three years ago, at which time I decided to eliminate pathology and proceed with my hematology/oncology practice. At age 70, I still do that full time, while dedicating every Wednesday to charity care.

I am forever grateful for the great education and happy, fulfilling years that I spent at Rutgers. My only regret is that with the passage of time, I have lost contact with most of my classmates and mentors.

I thank you for the opportunity to briefly revisit those wonderful years. **M**