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Looking like their patients — UM, MDC work to get more people of color into medical school

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Dr. Miguel Escanelle, who attended the Medical Scholars program at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, in a operating room at UHealth System on Sept. 12, 2022. UM and Miami Dade College recently expanded the Medical Scholars program to get more Black and Hispanic students into medical school and mentor them while there. Escanelle, who came to the U.S. from Cuba when he was a teen, is a resident cardiac anesthesiologist. CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com

Dr. Miguel Escanelle has always loved science. As an elementary school student in Cuba, he remembers excelling in his science and math courses, while struggling in Spanish. When he was 9, his father left Cuba for the Dominican Republic and he and his mom were left by themselves. After his mother lost her job as a special education teacher, they applied for asylum, waited a year to get a visa, and arrived in Homestead during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He was 15 and entered Coral Gables Senior High midway through his sophomore year, staying there until graduating.

He then enrolled at Miami Dade College, where he studied physics and engineering, believing the University of Miami was a dream school meant only for people with money. He earned his associate's degree from MDC; in 2013, he finished his undergraduate degree in physics at Florida International University. Now, Escanelle, 32, is a resident cardiac anesthesiologist with a medical degree from the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. He credits the Medical Scholars Program, a University of Miami summer program that prepares underserved students for medical school, for providing him the support system to succeed.

If it weren't for the program, he said, he would have probably become an engineer. At one point in his education, his counselor had even suggested he become a general contractor — something he had never expressed interest in. UM, MDC PARTNERSHIP Earlier this month, Miami Dade College and UM announced they would create a new partnership aimed at ensuring more students from MDC can participate in the Medical Scholars summer program. The medical school and MDC signed an agreement that guarantees a slot to qualified students from MDC in the Medical Scholars program. The program accepts around 120 students each year and is free. The program mentors students and helps them with scholarship applications, housing, meals, and transportation stipends. Students apply by writing a personal statement and sending transcripts and letters of recommendation.

Dr. Henri Ford, the dean of the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, says he hopes the program will change the face of medicine and be a step toward greater healthcare equity. "This program is the hope for the future; it is essential for the community," he said.



Dr. Henri Ford, dean of the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine Jorge R. Perez

The medical scholars live in the University of Miami undergraduate dorms in Coral Gables and take rigorous courses at the medical school, which is near Jackson Memorial Hospital. Escanelle remembers taking immunology, biochemistry, human physiology and bioethics. The program is rigorous and students “need to be willing to make that contract with themselves,” said Escanelle. Even after going through the program, Escanelle had a moment of doubt. Attending medical school and achieving his dream of becoming a doctor would mean attending 14 years of school, including his undergraduate studies, time that he could be making money to support his mother.

Dr. Nanette Vega, assistant professor of medical education and assistant dean for the Office of Diversity Equity and Inclusion at the medical school, encouraged Escanelle to persevere. She offered him a summer job in her office preparing students for the MCAT, the exams needed to attend medical school, to encourage Escanelle to stay true to his dream of becoming an anesthesiologist. “There were so many times where I thought I might give up, and found support,” said Escanelle. SHORTAGE OF DOCTORS By 2034, projections call for a shortage of 37,000 to 124,000 physicians nationwide, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. The shortage is most acute among Black and Hispanic doctors. In

2019, just under 6 percent of U.S. physicians identified as Hispanic, and only 5 percent identified as Black, according to the association's data.

"These are statistics we must change," said Ford. Students in the Medical Scholars program often say to Vega, "This is the first time I have met a Black doctor or a female doctor," she said. When one student from Colombia felt embarrassed because of her accent, Vega assured her that it would be an asset in the medical profession. Soon after, the student used her Spanish to put a Spanish-speaking patient at ease while shadowing a doctor who only spoke English. "The most important thing that the program did for me is to make me realize that it was possible, and it also showed me what it was going to take to make it," said Escanelle.

COMFORT LEVEL WITH DOCTOR WHO SPEAKS THEIR LANGUAGE Studies show that having a healthcare provider who is of the same race as a patient or who speaks the same language means the patient has a higher likelihood of agreeing to preventative care. Yet only 23 percent of Hispanic and Latinx patients reported their healthcare provider spoke to them in the language they preferred, according to a 2021 Health Reform Monitoring Survey. "I cannot tell you how many times I have walked into a patient room, and they are scared. They do not speak English. But when I communicate with them in Spanish, they feel much more comfortable and they open up. They go into surgery knowing there are people behind the scenes who look like them and will support them," Escanelle said. Madeline Pumariega, the Miami Dade College president, said the program will change the trajectories of people's lives. Sixty percent of high school graduates in Miami who attend college enroll at Miami Dade College, and she is happy the door for them to attend medical school is now easier to open.

At the recent launch of the partnership, Escanelle apologized to the crowd for not preparing a speech, as he had just come off a 16-hour shift at Jackson Memorial.



Dr. Miguel Escanelle, who attended the Medical Scholars program at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, is in a operating room at UHealth System on Sept. 12, 2022. UM and Miami Dade College recently expanded the Medical Scholars program, which prepares underserved students for medical school. He is a resident cardiac anesthesiologist. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com

He joked about switching from physics to medicine because “he likes to speak to people, not machines.” But then he turned to the Miami Dade Honors College students who attend the program and told them they are just as deserving, if not more, than other students at the medical school. “If I made it, all of you can make it,” he said. “For me, this is personal. When I look at these students, I see myself.”