

Confidence led this researcher to swim against the current

A researcher reflects on her successful journey from Venezuela to the US in which she became a doctor, a scientist, and a mother.

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Florencia enjoying time with her family.

Florencia Segal, a Senior Investigator in Translational Medicine in Novartis' Cambridge, MA office, grew up in Venezuela. Early in her life through her community work in high school and practice in state hospitals during medical school, she was exposed to the vast income inequality that existed in her county. "As a medical doctor, very early on I noticed the vast medical need and the impact a physician can have on a person's life. This was a big part of my early training and professional life," Florencia says.

She loved caring for patients, but her curiosity and her desire for different and broader learning opportunities led her to leave Venezuela. She moved to the U.S. for her residency and specialty training. It was during her clinical training as an infectious diseases fellow at Brigham and Women's and Massachusetts General Hospital, working among physician scientists, where she had the opportunity to learn firsthand of the basic science that was ubiquitous at Harvard. But becoming a scientist wasn't an easy transition. After her clinical training during her fellowship, at age 32, she had to choose the focus of the research she would pursue. Although she had minimal basic science training during medical school, she found herself drawn to understanding the basic mechanisms underlying her patient's diseases and wanted to learn and experience research in a basic science lab. During a meeting with her assigned mentors and Division Chief, she encountered resistance to her choice and was told that given her background she was unlikely to be

successful and should follow a traditional clinical path.

It is at this point, early in her career that Florencia chose to write to her younger self:



Dear Florencia,

You have made an exciting start to your career, you have certainly come far and find yourself in an environment completely different than the one you grew up in. It will lead to a lot of learning, which you so love, and accomplishment. As you proceed, however, I want to encourage you to keep your eyes open to new opportunities and be self-aware about what you want and need to be fulfilled professionally. It's easy to become complacent and move lockstep on a career path that everyone assumes is the best for you. But it can blind you to the circumstances around you, to change, to switch paths. Opportunities often require that you make choices that are outside your comfort zone and don't follow conventional wisdom. Only you can dictate what your career should look like, you will not be happy trying to meet the expectations of others. Now that you have completed your clinical training it may feel like the end of the road, but there is so much more for you to learn. Don't miss out, try something truly different, don't be afraid to look outside and challenge yourself. There is no long term path that must be followed.

You will struggle with the decision to move into the lab. For some, the idea that you will be spending your days learning how to use a pipette is incomprehensible. You will have to trust yourself that this is correct. This is not the only time that you will have to persuade yourself or others that it is okay to start from zero; it is okay to feel differently from everyone else about the path you should follow. At times you will wonder if there's something wrong with you, you will wonder if you are just being stubborn, a contrarian, or if you are simply making a mistake.

On that occasion, like this one, you will remember who you really are at the core, remember your strengths. Your ability to challenge assumptions, particularly your own, is a gift. That guiding principle will help you make the right choice and provide the confidence you need to swim against the current.

Take a chance,

Florencia

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