

access to care

A look at the challenges facing our profession

Photo: Tricia Koning



Elisa Ochoa creates a practice to address the specific needs of Pilsen

by Joanna Brown

WHEN IT CAME TIME TO PLAN HER FUTURE, ELISA OCHOA REFLECTED ON HER ROOTS. She thought back to her childhood and the times she was called on to translate the English spoken by health care providers, bankers and other professionals for her immigrant parents. Dr. Ochoa's parents emigrated from Mexico in the 1960s with limited knowledge of English, and it was clear to Dr. Ochoa early on that their inability to communicate grossly affected their knowledge base.

“As I got older, I knew that I wanted to work more hands-on in these situations to make it easier for families like mine to get what they need,” she said.

Today, Dr. Ochoa is readying her new dental office in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood with special features tailored for her Latino patient base. Her Mexican heritage, clinical training and experience living in Pilsen will improve

her adopted community.

“At school they taught us to practice where we wanted to live, and this is a community I vibed with,” said Dr. Ochoa, a 2011 graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Dentistry. “I'd never lived here growing up, but I had a lot of family in the area and I knew that there were opportunities and a really lively culture.”

She learned quickly that the neighborhood needs her service, too. While she found many resources for patients with Public Aid, she identified far fewer options for the working poor and lower middle class families.

So she designed a business model to

help them. When Pilsen Smiles opens later this summer, patients may pay an annual fee for a membership in her practice; this will include two cleanings, X-rays and dental exams, as well as discounts on other services and access to a payment plan.

She'll work evenings and early mornings, too, to accommodate the schedules of her working patients.

"I definitely won't be working bankers' hours," she said, "and the payment plan will enable patients to get their needs met in a timely fashion.

"We're not going to be just a dental office. I want to employ people from the neighborhood and improve it in any way we can. We don't know how little or how much people know about their health, but sometimes it just takes

someone they can trust to figure it out."

Toward that end, Dr. Ochoa has been working with Pilsen community leaders and not-for-profit organizations to learn more about the community's

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oral health while she completes construction on her new office space. The schedule is as rewarding as it is exhausting, but the experience is making her a better dentist and businesswoman, she said. She encouraged other young dentists to pursue a similar path.

"Figure out what motivates you, and

touch back on that," Dr. Ochoa said. "Look within yourself and see what got you here in the first place. That something is still within you, so be humble about where you came from.

"Get involved with your community; get to know the other business owners, get to know the aldermen and get introductions to other people and the not-for-profits. I walked door-to-door and lived in the community to learn what they go through and

what is their greatest need.

"Take a step back to work on yourself and realize what drives you. That should be enough to keep you moving and tackle what's on your plate." ■

Ms. Brown is a freelance journalist working in the Chicago metropolitan area.