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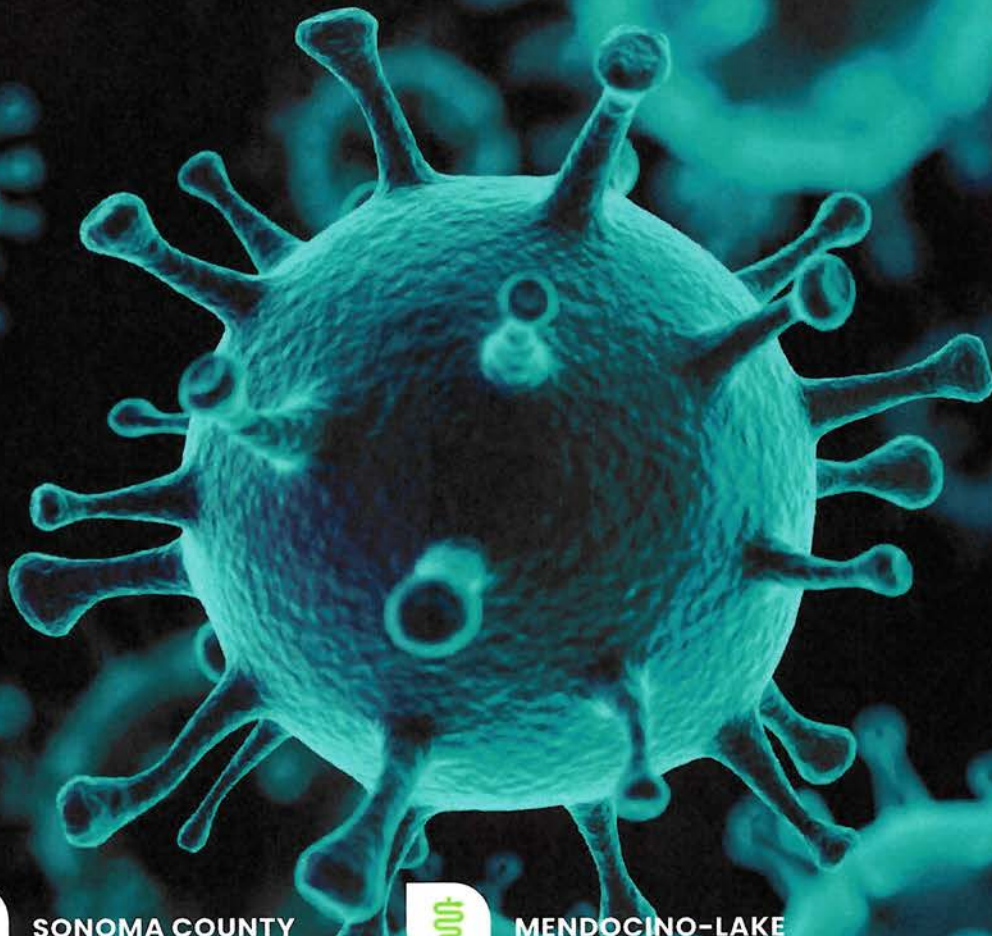
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Mi Futuro 2020: the North Bay's Annual Youth Healthcare Symposium

Tasha Vanden Heuvel

A beacon of warmth and hope on a cold January morning, the Grand Ballroom at Sonoma State University's Student Center beckoned more than 400 high school students from 25 high schools and four colleges to join Sonoma County healthcare professionals and volunteers for the 7th Annual Mi Futuro Youth Symposium. This much anticipated, sold-out event that promotes healthcare careers to local Latino youth took place on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020.

Expectations were high and the buzzing of excitement could be heard all the way downstairs as students flooded the third-floor ballroom. They were immediately immersed in the Justice Center, a forum of exhibitions from select agencies that advocate for education attainment, economic empowerment, and health access. Organizations included the Health Sciences Department at Santa Rosa Junior College, Wine Country Young Democrats, Sutter Health's "Future Faces of Family Medicine," Kaiser Permanente, the Santa Rosa Community Health Center, and Latino Service Providers.

One-on-one conversations between sponsors from these organizations and the students reinforced the

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Anita MacInnis, clinical nurse educator at Kaiser Permanente (top left) and Dr. Elia Cole, (right) resident, Kaiser Permanente Family Residency Program, lead students in a hands-on demonstration.

symposium's mission to inform, motivate, and compel youth to consider careers in the mental health and primary healthcare fields. In a photo booth at the front area, students eagerly posed for the camera in scrubs and medical props, dreaming of "mi futuro."

And then everyone came together. Students took their seats around white linen-covered tables with personalized Mi Futuro cinch bags slung over their chairs. SSU Senior Elizabeth Camacho and Kaiser Permanente's Dr. Robert Martinez welcomed the youth and touched upon Sonoma County's human development index, explaining the effects of social and economic resources on life expectancy and education. Camacho explained, "If you live in central Bennett Valley, you are more likely to live nine years longer than if you live in the Sheppard neighborhood." And part of the reason, she

explained, is that 58.6 percent of the population in Bennett Valley has a Bachelor's degree compared to 8.6 percent in Sheppard. Mi Futuro is about reaching the under-resourced youth—244 first-generation college student hopefuls were present—with economic, social, and educational resources through healthcare career promotion. Simply put, Mi Futuro is health promotion.

Introducing the day's theme "Lived Experiences: Storytelling," Mi Futuro founder Musetta Perezarce, an RN at Kaiser Permanente, explained the day's itinerary and then

quite delicately walked the attendees through a slide that illustrated the effects that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can have on health. With a rare transparency, she gave examples from her own childhood and her lived experiences as she modeled storytelling.

When asked what prompted her team to choose the theme "Lived Experiences: Storytelling," Perezarce responded, "It's easy to feel all that is wrong with our tough stories. Lived experience is about finding resources in our hard stories to make us more whole." She gave the students tools to structure their storytelling with soft edges, or boundaries, and to normalize their lived experiences by considering our local wildfires with respect to those around the country and the world.

PHOTOS BY NESTOR TORRES LUPERCIO





Participating physicians Dr. Rob Martinez, Kaiser Family Medicine Residency Program; Dr. Peter Valenzuela, chief medical officer, Sutter Medical Group of the Redwoods; and Dr. Chad Krilich, chief medical officer, St. Joseph Health.

Mi Futuro founder and chair, Musetta Perezarce, RN.

Instrumental in “setting the table” for the focus of the day was the first of three speakers, Dr. Peter Valenzuela, chief medical officer, Sutter Medical Group of the Redwoods. He encouraged students to follow their dreams while painting a sobering, yet inspiring portrait of his childhood. Dr. Valenzuela presented a true story of resiliency, rising above his 10/10 ACE score as a young boy to become the physician he is today.

Mi Futuro’s panel of speakers are members of the Physician Executive Team for the Committee for Healthcare Improvement (CHI), a group focused on promoting person-centered healthcare in Sonoma County. CHI is a coalition of healthcare providers and community health partners who are leading healthcare system improvement.

Using humor complemented by images on the large screen, the second speaker, Dr. Chad Krilich, chief medical officer, St. Joseph Health, encouraged attendees to pick themselves up when they fail and promised them that overcoming adversity would help them in the future. When asked his thoughts on the youth symposium, Dr. Krilich said, “Knowing this audience has experienced challenges, whether they be related to violence or otherwise, it was humbling to be present. What is even more awe-inspiring is that they want to work in healthcare. Being able to deliver my message was a privilege.”

Interspersed among the storytelling were activities created by Kaiser Permanente Family Medicine Residency to spark the students’ thinking regarding their own stories, sketching out

timelines of their lives, and imagining their futures. Dr. Patricia Hiserote, program director of Kaiser’s Family Medicine Residency program, said she enjoys working with Mi Futuro because it inspires healthcare providers of the future to join the workforce. “It’s exciting to work with these teens and expose them to the many career opportunities available to them. We are honored to be part of Mi Futuro and look forward to working with this community.”

Overwhelmed and grateful for this exposure, Raegan, a junior from Rancho Cotati High School, approached Perezarce during a break to inquire about internship opportunities. “I just feel so blessed to have the opportunity to attend this event,” she told Perezarce.

Back in their seats, the crowd was speechless once again as the third speaker, Dr. Jason Cunningham, chief executive officer, West County Health Centers, shared with heartfelt passion the value of every human and how relationships are the “secret sauce.” “One thing that endears me to Sonoma County, and something I have now seen tangibly through our collective trauma in the wildfires, is recognition of the benefit and importance of community.”

Hip-hop music broke the hushed silence and lightened the mood before lunch as Sonoma State’s Blue Baronz Dance Club took the stage to lead the students in a hand-hygiene dance. The power of dancing and laughing together bolstered the solidarity that had spread across the young crowd.

The afternoon that followed allowed students to rotate through various

stations, which ranged from workshops on mental health; self-care; and money and college; to the value of mentors. Students also had the opportunity to participate in hands-on med tracks led by residents from Kaiser’s Santa Rosa Family Medicine Residency. Dr. Hiserote explained, “One of the goals of our program is to train family medicine physicians who will serve our community. We support Mi Futuro because it is inspiring the healthcare clinicians who will one day take care of us!”

Without question, it’s the authentic and passionate testimonies, the invaluable resources, and the face-to-face contact provided by over 100 volunteers that gave students something to strive for, something to seek. Dr. Valenzuela said, “No one can touch the stars until they’ve reached the depths of despair and fought their way out.” By sharing his own challenges as an adolescent, he instilled hope and courage in the hearts of many students. He made overcoming adversity a realistic goal—a tangible dream.

“It was clear that these students were held tightly by a group of courageous leaders and thoughtful mentors who had a passion to empower a new generation of leaders and healthcare professionals. I have been in this business long enough to understand the commitment and love that is required to make something like this happen and am hopeful that these bright, young men and women will be more resilient as a result,” Dr. Cunningham remarked after the event. Hope was most certainly in the air. ■

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