

Valle provided an  
opportunity to deepen  
my understanding



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Valle Hermosa is a small town in northern Mexico My grandfather lived in a small town that lacked any hospital or health clinic.

Community members, in the event of an emergency, were forced to drive across the border into Brownsville, Texas to access medical care. Before my grandfather moved to the United States, I had not considered that access to care varied greatly depending on where you lived in the world. He was diagnosed at the time with esophageal cancer, and My freshman year of college, he moved United States. My grandfather's medical care placed a large financial burden on my family just as college began and, consequently, I became financially responsible for my academic and living expenses. I worried that working nearly full-time would hinder my ambition to pursue a medical degree, but I firmly discerned that my situation also provided an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the medical field outside the classroom.

It was in this pursuit that I began as a medical scribe at Providence Emergency Room. The extended hours of the hospital allowed me to work nights and weekends, and then attend class during the day. One evening a man, paralyzed from the waist down, presented in the emergency room complaining of a pungent smell arising from his wheelchair.

During his physical exam, we found a large ulcer on his buttock deep enough to expose bone. His injury, the result of tremendous neglect, required surgery to prevent the infection from taking his life. The patient reported that he had been evicted from his apartment and, now homeless, had been unable to attend his physical therapy sessions. I was shocked by the cascade of

events that allowed for a pressure ulcer to develop into a life-threatening condition. To my surprise, I would continue to see this patient numerous times throughout my two years at Providence Hospital. A combination of heroin abuse and mental illness made it difficult for him to seek care outside the emergency room.

I admired how the physicians built his trust over the years by treating him with understanding and compassion each time he arrived, and I desperately wished there was more I could do to help. Ultimately, my time at Providence Hospital helped me understand the inextricable link between poverty and disease, and I recognized the tremendous need for physicians to serve in under-resourced areas. Concurrently, my passion for social justice began to crystallize.

I vividly remember listening to Dr. Paul Farmer, a leading global health expert and human rights activist, deliver a lecture on tuberculosis. He spoke about the role of social justice in healthcare, and the need for more funding and research to be allocated towards conditions that disproportionately affect underserved communities. It was my first realization that many people are still not receiving the benefits of contemporary medicine. Encouraged by his lecture, I began working as a Research Assistant at the Maryland Center for Health Equity to elucidate barriers to colorectal cancer screening in African American communities. While interviewing participants I fostered perhaps my most important skill during college: listening. Through their stories I developed an impassioned awareness of the socioeconomic and cultural barriers that hinder access to care. better individual, a more empathetic student, and hopefully a more informed doctor.

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After graduating, I was awarded the Mickey Leland International Hunger fellowship to lead a research project on food insecurity in Uganda. I have spent the past year documenting the remarkable stories of the Acholi community that live in the northern region. This community has suffered from significant hardships for decades - insurrection of the Lord's Resistance Army, forced relocation to internally displaced camps, and political failures - that have left many without access to a stable food supply or reliable medical care. My Ugandan colleagues are hopeful that better visibility on the international stage will translate to more reliable delivery of aid. As for me, I am hopeful as well.

To consider my responsibility to pull these lessons from my experiences in Uganda to ensure that I am a better individual, a more informed student and hopefully a wiser doctor.