

News

Office of Medical Information
The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235-9060 214/688-3404

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CONTACT: Jennifer Donovan
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/328-3193
Fax: 214/688-8252

****Hispanic Activist Physician keynotes
UT Southwestern graduation

DALLAS -- When commencement speaker Hector P. Garcia, M.D., brings his charge and challenge to 220 graduating students at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas at 8:00 p.m. Saturday, June 2, he's likely to talk about standing up to be counted, about overcoming obstacles, about human rights and human needs.

And on those matters Dr. Garcia speaks from a lifetime of experience.

From the rides he thumbed to get from his home town of Mercedes, Texas, to The University of Texas Medical School in Galveston more than half a century ago, through the outrage at discrimination against Mexican-American veterans that led to the founding of his American G.I. Forum, to his intense concern today for the health and welfare of thousands of residents of the unincorporated "colonias" that line the American side of the Mexican border, the 76-year-old family practitioner from Corpus Christi has never hesitated to take an unpopular stand or tackle a problem head-on.

Often it thrust him into the political limelight. During President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, Dr. Garcia was the first Hispanic to be appointed to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, as well as this country's first Mexican-American ambassador to the United Nations. He also became the first member of the U.S. delegation to

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address the U.N. General Assembly in a language other than English, speaking in Spanish on the issue of nuclear weapons in Latin America.

Dr. Garcia was born in Mexico, the son of an educator who moved his family to Mercedes when the boy was only three years old. Six of the seven Garcia children became physicians.

Best-known for his work on behalf of Mexican-Americans through the American G.I. Forum, which he helped found in 1948, Dr. Garcia has been called the Mexican-Americans' Martin Luther King.

However, despite international recognition and innumerable awards --including a Presidential Medal of Freedom he received from Ronald Reagan -- the physician has never let his political or social activism interfere with his practice of medicine. In fact at 76 he still sees patients daily in his clinic in the barrio of Corpus Christi.

One of Dr. Garcia's ongoing concerns is the low percentage of Mexican-American medical students and physicians, particularly in Texas where a substantial segment of the population is Hispanic. For example, he estimates that only 22 percent of the physicians in Nueces County where he practices are Mexican-American although more than half the population is of Hispanic origin. And, says Dr. Garcia, the statewide percentage of Mexican-American doctors is considerably lower than that.

Finances are a major barrier for many Hispanic students seeking a medical education, the activist physician observes. And the education that Mexican-American children are receiving may be an even more serious problem, he suggests.

"We must never forget that education is our freedom," he is fond of saying, "and that freedom should be everybody's business."

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The lack of role models also is a factor, Dr. Garcia believes. In an effort to help solve this problem, he is encouraging Mexican-American physicians to become increasingly visible and outspoken in their own communities.

"We have made great progress," he says, "but I am afraid that some of our young people will take it for granted. They don't know the struggle we had to go through. I want to get more of them involved in leadership."

After Dr. Garcia's address, the annual Ho Din award to the medical student whose personal attributes best reflect those inherent in all truly great physicians will be presented by Mary McDermott Cook on behalf of the Southwestern Medical Foundation.

Shannon Ratliff, a member of the Board of Regents of The University of Texas System, will confer degrees and Dr. Phil H. Berry Jr., president of the Dallas County Medical Society, will administer the physician's oath.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.