

All in the family

"THE APPLE DOESN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE," INDEED. WITH FIVE SUCCESSFUL PHYSICIANS FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THEIR FAMILY PATRIARCH, **DR. JOSE BONILLA**, MEDICINE TRULY RUNS IN THE BLOOD OF THE BONILLA FAMILY.

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Photography: [ALEXANDER ALEMAN and SARAH BROOKE LYONS]

It is not too often that almost an entire family pursues a medical career, but with a hardworking, devoted and influential father who was also an excellent physician, Dr. Jose Bonilla led the way for the next generation of Bonilla doctors. Without even knowing that his driving force left immeasurable imprints on his children's plans for the future, he forged ahead with his plans before he and his wife started a family.

Jose was born in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, and he went to medical school in Monterrey, Mexico. After graduating, he obtained his residency in obstetrics/ gynecology at the Robert B. Green Hospital in San Antonio. Although the initial plan was to return to Mexico after his training, he fell in love with the city and decided to stay in San Antonio. He began his practice in 1966.

While other physicians chose to practice in the more lucrative north side of San Antonio known as "The Hill," Jose felt there was a need to help the people of downtown and the south side of San Antonio. He decided to practice downtown for his entire career.

"It is common for people to walk up to my dad and tell him that he delivered the grandmother, mother and grandbaby," says Jose's son, Arturo. "I hear it all the time: 'Your dad delivered me and all of my children.'"

Jose's devotion to his practice is surpassed only by his devotion to his wife and five children. "My wife, Laurentina, was the backbone of the family," he explains. "She was the one that was in charge of driving the kids from place to place, helping them with homework, helping me manage my office, cooking at home and everything else you could think of."

Together, they raised five children: Dr. Juan Bonilla, a practicing pediatric otolaryngologist; Dr. Esther Laura Bonilla, a practicing den-



PHOTO BY ALEXANDER ALEMAN



tist; Dr. Arturo Bonilla, a practicing pediatric ear reconstructive surgeon; Dr. Jorge Bonilla, a practicing pediatric anesthesiologist; and Dr. Lorena Bonilla, a dental hygienist and attorney.

Although he downplays his role, the medical patriarch attributes the success of his children to his wife. As busy as Jose was, his children say he was always there during their activities. "Our dad would get the call, run to the hospital to deliver a baby and was back watching us during all of our activities in no time at all," his children say. "We don't remember dad not being there because he was always there."

"My parents never pushed us into medicine," Arturo emphasizes. "They always told us to do whatever we wanted to do, but to be the best at it. Their hard work, values and integrity were what made all of us want to be just like them. Our mom was always and continues to be the epicenter of the family."

The three sons attended Central Catholic High School, and the two daughters attended Incarnate

Word High School. All five children spent their college years at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. After college, each one followed a different path.

Juan went to the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and continued with his residency in general surgery at the State University of New York – Buffalo. He then continued his otolaryngology/head and neck surgery residency in Buffalo and completed his fellowship in pediatric otolaryngology at Boston Children's Hospital. Today, he is a specialist in pediatric sinus disease and pediatric airway anomalies.

"After seeing my dad's passion and love of his work, I was convinced that I wanted to go into medicine," Juan says. "I chose pediatric head and neck surgery because I felt I could really make a difference in these kids' lives."

Arturo studied at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston for his medical school years. His general surgery residency followed at

Methodist Hospitals in Dallas. He then went to Buffalo, N.Y., for his residency in otolaryngology/head and neck surgery, and he completed his fellowship in pediatric otolaryngology at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh under the direction of the world-renowned Dr. Charles Bluestone.

Today, Arturo is the only exclusive pediatric ear reconstructive surgeon in the United States. He specializes in reconstruction of children born without ears. Children with ear deformities and severe hearing loss come from all over the world to see him.

"One thing I admired about my dad was that as busy as he was, he never missed any of our school and sports functions," he says. "He and my mom were very involved with all of my brothers' and sisters' lives. If he could do this, then so could I."

"I chose pediatric ear reconstructive surgery because it was such a rare ear deformity and there were few doctors in the world that specialized in this field. When one of my patients said that he

could hear the birds chirping for the first time in his life, I knew I was hooked. Pediatric microtia surgery became my passion. These children who are born without ears and with severe hearing loss have a life transformation after the surgeries. There is nothing more gratifying than that."

Jorge attended the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston and continued his internal medicine transitional residency at the University of Pittsburgh. He continued his anesthesiology residency at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. He then went to Denver Children's Hospital for his fellowship in pediatric anesthesiology.

"I chose medicine because medicine runs in our blood," he says. "Everyone in my family was initially in the medical field, and I saw how my dad changed so many lives. I chose to specialize in pediatric anesthesiology because of the technical skills involved in dealing with pediatric airways. Presently, I perform all kinds of anesthesia with Star Anesthesia."

Esther Laura attended dental school at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. "I chose a different path because I had a great interest in family dentistry," she says. "I was fortunate to graduate through the dental program in San Antonio (which is considered the top dental school in the country). I have been in private practice for over 20 years in the downtown area and had my office located right across from my father's office."

Lorena attended St. Mary's University School of Law. "I chose a different path, as well," she adds. "Although I received training as a dental hygienist and continue to practice with my sister, I wanted to go down a different path. We always hear the funny comments that with so many doctors in the family, we needed to have a lawyer, too. Although not for that reason, I decided to pursue a law degree, and I am very happy balancing everything in my life."

What makes the brothers stand out is that they are the only pediatric specialist brothers who work together in the operating room in the United States. Juan's training at Boston Children's Hospital gave him the skills to be a highly sought-after pediatric sinus surgeon. He has been in private practice for more than 25 years.

Arturo initially joined Juan's practice, but because of his pediatric ear specialty training from Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, he branched off into solo practice to exclusively specialize in pediatric ears. Since then, his practice has grown into the largest exclusive pediatric ear reconstructive practice in the United States. His practice specializes in the surgical reconstruction of children born without ears. Parents continue to bring their children from all over the world to have their ears built by Arturo. Throughout the year, Jorge provides pediatric anesthesia services for both of his brothers.

The goals of all five Bonilla children are the same: to continue to dedicate their lives to their trade, while at the same time, balance the time with their spouses and children. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree" is an excellent saying that is applicable to the Bonilla family. The patients of all of these fine physicians are lucky, indeed; the Bonillas care about each and every one of their patients, just as their father did.

PHOTO BY SARAH BROOKE LYONS

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Jose, the patriarch, recently retired after having practiced for nearly 50 years and delivered tens of thousands of babies. He was so accustomed to being on the go all of his life that he forgot how to take things at a slower pace. He has since gotten used to the retirement world and spends all of his time with his wife and children. His activities include going to his daughter's dental office to help with office activity, and he loves pruning in the garden, even when it is not his garden.

The future of the medical world is in the hands of his children, and he feels a lot safer knowing that a plethora of patients will be well taken care of by his own DNA: his intelligent and highly skilled children.

Note: While NSIDE officially adheres to AP style, certain exceptions were made in the editing of this article.

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