

Hippocrates Circle

Nurturing young physicians of the future



Photo by Jeff Cutting

Those encouraging words not only set Dr. Sistos on the path to become a physician, but also became the seeds decades later for Hippocrates Circle, a program designed to encourage middle-school students from underrepresented communities to pursue a career in medicine.

“It occurred to me, if one doctor had such an incredible impact on me, it’s possible we (the partners of SCPMG) could have a similar impact on someone else,” said Dr. Sistos who began Hippocrates Circle in San Diego. “This doctor would never know the impact his words had on me. I had absolutely no idea how I would become a doctor, but I knew I was going to be one.”

This year Hippocrates Circle, a community benefit program unique to Kaiser Permanente Southern California, celebrates its 10th year.

Dr. Sistos co-founded the mentoring program with Maria Torres and Laarni Fontillas, of Sales and Account Management, Labor and Trust Funds in San Diego, with 25 to 30 students at a local middle school and eight doctors. At the urging of Jeffrey Weisz, MD, executive medical director, SCPMG, to replicate the program as a best practice in every medical center, Hippocrates Circle has grown regionwide and now serves targeted schools in every KP service area. It has won numerous awards; the most recent is the 2010 R. J. Erickson Award. The award is presented to KP employees and physicians who distinguish themselves through diversity advocacy, cultural competence, workforce diversity, and community service.

Ten years later, Hippocrates Circle has given more than 2,400 students the confidence to become physicians. Students attend orientation with their parents; go on field trips to KP

When Ricardo Sistos, MD, was a young boy growing up in Mexico, he thought he would follow in the foot steps of his father, a shoemaker. But at the age of 10 a physician said something that changed his life forever.

“Are you smart?” Dr. Sistos, a Family Practitioner at the Glendale Medical Offices and 30-year veteran of SCPMG, recalled the doctor asking him. “I gave him a copy of my report card and after looking at it he said, “You know, you’re smart enough to be a doctor.’ I believed him, and from that point on I decided I wanted to be a doctor.”



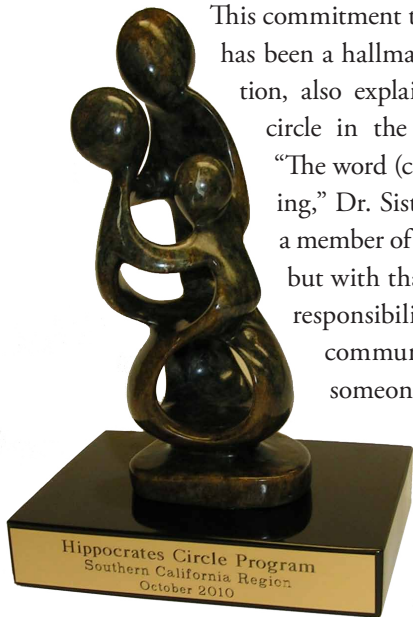
Photos by Jeff Curting



Hippocrates Circle participants tour the Baldwin Park Medical Center - one of several field trips during a three-month program that encourages students to pursue a career in medicine. (Left to right): Simon Martinez, orthopedic tech, shows Timothy Valdez, 8th grade student, the process of making a cast, and James Baker, MD, Emergency Medicine, answers questions from several students.

hospitals and local medical schools, while parents attend workshops on medical school costs and the ins-and-outs of financial aid. At the end of three months, both the children and their parents celebrate with a special graduation dinner.

The program uses hundreds of KP physicians, administrators, and staff volunteers to “plant the seeds” of medicine as a vocation. Maria Carrasco, MD, regional physician leader for Culturally Competent Care, whose department now oversees the award-winning regionwide program, believes the mentoring program is helping to fill a crucial need. “It’s very important to have minority physicians working in the communities they come from ...because we want to be able to mirror the communities we serve,” she said.



This commitment to the community, which has been a hallmark of KP since its inception, also explains the use of the word circle in the name of the program. “The word (circle) has a double meaning,” Dr. Sistos said. “It means you’re a member of a very special elite group, but with that benefit also comes the responsibility to go back to your community, and do the same for someone else.”

“We want the students to look at us (the mentors) and say I am just like they are, and if they were able to


become doctors so can I. We are not special people, we do special things, but it is because of our training.”

So far the strategy seems to be working. Several graduates of the program are now in college and have declared their intent to be physicians.

Dominic Toctocan, who attended the program six years ago and is now a freshman at the University of California San Diego, is grateful for the exposure he received. “When I was 12 years old, I had a lot of things I wanted to be, and medicine wasn’t really one of the main things. But going to Hippocrates Circle totally focused my attention and made me more interested in medicine. Being told that I could be a doctor was such a good thing for me because I honestly thought that it wasn’t something I could do, coming from the Philippines at age 11. I wasn’t really good at English and I just knew I had to do a lot of work. Going through the program absolutely made me more confident in becoming a doctor.”

This is good news to Drs. Sistos and Carrasco. “I want the students to reach for the stars. To go for whatever they want to go for—hopefully medicine,” said Dr. Sistos.

“My biggest message to the students,” added Dr. Carrasco, “is don’t let anyone or anything stop you from reaching your dreams, because your dreams are what defines you as a person in achieving your goals and the sky is the limit. Go for it, go all the way.”

For more information or to watch a video about Hippocrates Circle, visit kp.org/hippocratescircle. 

— *Mi Chelle Sorey*

The Hippocrates Circle Program received the 2010 R.J. Erickson Diversity Achievement Award at the 33rd Annual National Diversity Conference.