

Becas Para Aztlán: Forty-One Years Later

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Abstract: The Becas para Aztlán Program allowed me to study medicine at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana and complete a year of Servicio Social. This paper chronicles my journey as a medical student, my year of public service, and the highs and lows I faced. It also includes my personal perspective on how the program could have been administered in such a way to have maximized the desired goal as envisioned by the creators of the Becas Program and minimized the struggle to achieve that goal. This narrative also discusses how my university experience in Mexico City has shaped by life.

Keywords: Becas para Aztlán, Servicio Social, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana

Becas Para Aztlán: Forty-one Years Later

This paper recounts my experiences as a Becas para Aztlánⁱ (BPA) scholarship recipient to study medicine at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitanaⁱⁱ, including a year of servicio socialⁱⁱⁱ, as well as the trials and tribulations that I faced as a Chicana becaria living and studying in Mexico City. It also includes my personal perspective on how the BPA program could have been administered in such a way to have maximized the desired goal as envisioned by the creators of the Becas Program and minimized struggles to achieve that goal. This narrative also discusses how my university experience in Mexico City has shaped my life and career trajectory.

Precursory Experience leading to University Study in Mexico City

There was no mistaking that my father wanted me to go to college, specifically, St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Every Sunday we would pile into the car and he would drive the family to the front of the university and point out "your school". Since I was the oldest, he was talking to me. So, my first and only choice was St. Mary's University.

According to the career testing done at the placement center at St. Mary's, I had a future in health care and I choose pre-med as my major. Some areas were easy and some were very hard, but I did the best I could with what I had. And although I had a few medical school interviews, nothing panned out.

I received my BA from St. Mary's University and found a job teaching Physical Science for a year at Harlandale High School. During that year, I applied to the Med-Tech course at the Baptist Memorial Hospital System to train as what is now known as a Clinical Lab Scientist. It was soon after that that my father found out about the Becas Program and encouraged me to apply, which I did.

While waiting for a reply to my application, I took the summer off and went to Europe with a friend of mine. It was great! I learned about cultures other than my own. I learned that although everything seemed so different, many things were the same. That experience helped prepare me for what was to come and gave me some insight into what living outside my comfort zone would be like.

Soon after returning from Europe, I received my acceptance letter to the Becas Para Aztlán Program. Then came the whirlwind of leaving my old life behind and the beginning of my new life. It has been 41 years since my Becas Para Aztlán journey began. Sometimes it feels as though it were yesterday and other times the memory is so faint that I find it hard to believe that I lived that experience.

Mexico City and Medical School

My visit to Mexico City, Mexico happened in the fall of 1978; it was the beginning of a radically different chapter in my life that would influence my immediate future and the rest of my life in ways that were wonderful and sometimes disappointing.

The first two weeks of the Becas Program was an intense indoctrination in living in Mexico within the confines of the Becas contract administrated by CONACYT^{iv}. Student visas

were to have the correct stamps and signatures; becarios^v were assigned to universities according to their area of study; it was explained what was expected of the becarios as to GPA's to maintain; and how and when our stipends were to be distributed.

I was assigned to the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), which was located on the outskirts of Mexico City near Xochimilco. To get to the university, I had to take the metro to the end of the Tasqueña^{vi} line and get on a bus, called a “pollero”^{vii} or a gypsy cab to the UAM bus stop. The university was made up of grey concrete buildings in the middle of farmland. At the registrar's office you signed up for classes which were based on a modular system and you took in sequential order. The first 2 years were classroom work and the last two were hospital based. I worked hard all four years as well as my year of “servicio”, an additional year of community service in an underserved area in Mexico City.

The hardest year was my first year. I remember the mad scramble to find the correct text books, which meant the right book at the right price; a comprehensive Spanish-English dictionary that included medical Spanish, the notebooks, pens, highlighters, and the beloved “fichas”^{viii}. In the modular learning system, we took notes on “fichas”, index cards, or “flashcards”. They are very much still in use by students of all ages. At the time, I thought, “OK, I got this” until my personal issues got in the way. I HATE 3 x 5-inch ruled index cards!!! Try to find index cards in Mexico City in 1978. My preference has always been 4x6 inch unruled index cards, try to find those in Staples or Office Depot in 2019.

I enjoyed my classes and the students in my class. Everyone was anxious to improve their English with me or help me improve my Spanish. Those kids were very kind, accepting and helpful. A few even invited me into their homes for dinner. Most of the time I found that my classmates were helpful and more supportive than my Becas classmates.

Settling into a Home Life in Mexico

Then there was my home life in Mexico City. I am not going to say much about it except that people in the Becas Program saw me as the embodiment of the bourgeois life style that was an anathema to the principles of La Raza Unida^{ix}. Then there were the people who offered genuine friendships. In hindsight, I think that everyone was trying to find their comfort zone in order to cope anyway they could however they could. So, I kept my eyes on the prize and kept studying.

The first few years I lived in a 3-bedroom house with other becarias from the 1978 group. Some of us were in medical school, UAM and UNAM^x, another was in art school and another was in a master's program. The house I lived in was directly behind the General Anaya metro station, one stop before the end of the line, Tasqueña and its attached bus and taxi hub. Most of the time I took the metro to the Tasqueña station and caught the bus to UAM. The alternative was a “pesero”^{xi}, a taxi with a predetermined route with a beginning and an end that was shared with others. All you had to do to catch a ride was flag down the pesero and jump in and get off at your destination. Those were good times. We all did what we had to do to stay in school.

The second year of the BPA Program brought in a new crop of Becarios and most of them touched base with those of us with established homes in Mexico City. The new becarios

would spend a few days with us until they found housing, and returned when they needed more orientation to Mexico City, or insider information on the university they were assigned; or whatever additional information or affirmation that they needed. I guess we represented the hope that they could make it in a megalopolis like Mexico City without a car, in a culture that was nothing like that of the United States, doing the best we could with what we had and doing it successfully.

In the 1979 becario class I found an Easter egg, Fred Dominguez. Together we survived the ups and downs that was life as students in a foreign country and beyond. I was not the only becaria to have found her life's anchor in Mexico. I consider it incredible that I found the love of my life in such an unexpected place as Mexico.

I had few friends in the Becas Program. In the 1978 class there were two, in the 1979 class there were two, and in the 1980 class there were another two. A total of 6 people who offered true and unbiased friendships that have lasted to the present day. I did have friendships with other members of the Becas Program but none as steadfast as those six.

Gaining a New Perspective through Servicio Social

What really opened my eyes to the true hardship of living in Mexico City were my two clinical years. I thought I had it bad because I did not have what I wanted when I wanted it, working with the underserved showed me what it was like to live without the basics like food, potable water, shelter, money, and stability for a lifetime.

The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana's basic tenet, at the time, was that giving service to the community is an integral part of being a well-rounded doctor. So, we would do community outreach and canvas the selected areas by doing home visits. I will always remember one particular home visit where, in order to reach the home, you had to navigate the rivulets of waste on each side of the packed earth sidewalk. The home had a packed dirt floor and the food was stored in bags hung high up on the poles that held up the roof. The lady of the house was very kind and patient in answering our questions. I had a view of the front yard of the house and noticed a large pup cross the yard. To break up the monotony of the questionnaire, I asked the woman about her puppy. She just laughed and told me that the family did not own a dog, that what I saw was a rat. I was stunned. The area where the family lived was behind the Estadio Azteca. In Mexico City you didn't have to go far to find the underserved.

The next memory of those clinical years was during my OB/GYN rotation. At that time, if the patient needed a procedure done, the patient was responsible for providing all the necessary supplies to be used, such as medication, gauze, sterile pads, syringes, anything that might be needed for the procedure. In this case it was a jar of honey. The woman had a cesarean section and was in recovery. The obstetrician had sutured her up to a certain point, but did not close the wound completely. I remember the doctor climbing up onto the bed, straddling the woman, and pouring honey into the open wound and bandaging her up. When I asked purpose of the honey, the doctor explained that the wound had to close by secondary intention. This would be repeated until the wound closed.

The third memory was when I delivered a baby in the clinic during my year of servicio. You would think that this would be something happy. No, not a chance. There wasn't a Doppler^{xii}, or ultrasound machine, or nurse. There was only me, my stethoscope, Leopold's maneuvers^{xiii}, and prayer. The baby was breech^{xiv} and had to be manually turned so that it came out head first. The baby was finally born, but was anencephalic^{xv} and died soon after in her mother's arms. Nothing can prepare you for anything like that.

So, I finished my four years of medical school and my year of servicio social and graduated from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. I still have a copy of my thesis and the school ring I never wore, and I returned home.

Personal Perspective on the BPA Program

Hind sight is always 20/20 and in retrospect there were many positive and negative outcomes from my experience as a Becaria. I have never regretted pursuing a medical school education in Mexico. I have, however, given thought to how it could have been done better. The idea of helping young Mexican American students fulfill their career dreams is laudable, in a perfect world there should be a practical and realistic plan to carry it out successfully.

I feel that one of the flaws of the program was the idea that being a Mexican-American equates with being Mexican. It does not. Even if you are first generation Mexican-American born in the United States or brought over at a young age, English becomes the language you use to function in the real world, i.e., the United States. Spanish may be the language you speak at home but, in order to achieve academic success, your mastery of English should be competitive. The same thing can be said of your mastery of the Spanish language. There were countless times that my San Antonio Spanish was definitely not up to competing on a university level. I would memorize certain phrases or words so that I could use them appropriately and correctly. To this day, I have trouble pronouncing the word amebiasis in English, it will be amebiasis, spelled the same, but pronounced differently. I tend to default to the Spanish pronunciation.

The differences also apply to culture, the culture of Mexican Americans is fundamentally different from Mexican culture. For example, Cinco de Mayo is not given as much attention in Mexico as it has in the United States. In Mexico Cinco de Mayo commemorates the Battle of Puebla when Mexican forces lead by General Ignacio Zaragoza faced off against the French forces lead by General Charles de Lorencez. This "holiday" has been celebrated in California since 1863 as well as in the rest of the U.S. In the 1980's, there was a major marketing campaign by beer companies to capitalize beer sales on that historic day. Therefore, there are many similarities between the two cultures, as well as many differences.

There is also the process of acclimation. Mexico City is not for the faint of heart. Becarios could have benefitted from some kind of practical field guide/handbook that provided information about basic transportation like metro lines, buses, trollies, peseros and taxis; basic stores to shop for necessities; affordable bookstores, restaurants, clothing and stationery stores could have been made available. Nowadays, there is Siri, Alexa, Amazon Echo and Echo Dot that can help you out in real time.

Another helpful item would have been a copy of the stipend disbursement schedule from CONACYT with dates of disbursement and provisions for late disbursements and what resources we could tap into until the stipends were made available. Since the disbursement schedule was so haphazard, and I had already gone through my savings, I had to work. There wasn't much of a choice if I had to eat, pay rent, and travel from home to school, clinics and hospitals. So, I taught English as a second language through a company run by an American woman whose name I remember as being "Teddy". I remember meeting her at her apartment. The meeting was in the morning and she hosted a breakfast buffet with the prospective hires. She was a gracious hostess, and explained the type of clients to which we would be assigned, how to document the hours work, how and when to turn in the timesheets, and how we were to be paid. My salary was always on time and her checks never bounced. I was assigned to teaching executives from Banamex. I learned a lot from Teddy.

I really enjoyed my job and my students were great gentlemen. The one thing I really could have used was a mentor. Someone who was truly comfortable in both the Mexican-American and the Mexican cultures to whom one could bounce ideas off of and get help with insight into how best to handle a situation, or just be a friend and listen to you vent, no judgements.

Another missing piece was a reintegration plan. I had been out of the country for 5 years. Granted, I went back home intermittently, but then I was experiencing reverse culture shock. In my case, I did not have a job to come back to; I didn't have a car; and I did not have a clue on how to apply for medical licensure. I didn't have any money, but I did have my family. They helped me ease back into life and wanted to know all about my experiences. I told them everything over time, and as always, they were supportive. So, I slowly and positively figured everything out. I got a job teaching kindergarten and studying for the ECFMG^{xvi}.

Married Life and New Opportunities

A year after returning from Mexico, Fred and I got married in my home town of San Antonio, Texas. Shortly after we settled into life in Whittier, California. I got a job teaching seventh and eighth grade English and Science and continued to study for the ECFMG.

Newly married, with a fulltime job as primary breadwinner while Fred pursued a Master's Degree at UCLA, extra money for Kaplan review courses and tries at passing the ECFMG was in very short supply. Priorities had to be readjusted and I used the knowledge acquired in Mexico in a different way.

The following year Fred helped me get a job as a manager of a family planning clinic. It was there that I met the most inspiring women I ever had the pleasure of meeting: the Women's Health Care Nurse Practitioners. I learned so much from them. Through them I experienced the highs and lows of providing health care, from contraceptive counselling through 36 weeks of pregnancy and everything in between.

Then I was offered another golden opportunity. If I successfully completed the RN^{xvii} program and passed the NCLEX,^{xviii} the family planning company I worked for would facilitate my application to the Harbor REI Women's Health Care Nurse Practitioner Program. I finished

my ADN^{xix} RN program at Rio Hondo College, took the NCLEX, passed, and joined Class 88 of the Women's Health Care Nurse Practitioner Program.

The program was brutal, in many ways just as grueling as the program in Mexico City, except that this time I had a car, a very supportive husband, 2 beautiful girls, and some money. The Title X family planning company where I was employed continued to pay my salary during the year I was in the Nurse Practitioner Program. I was very lucky. The one "catch" to the whole thing was that I had to commit to staying with the company for two years, before leaving for a new job. I decided I could do that.

About a year into my career as a Women's Nurse Practitioner, the executive director of the family planning company I worked for approached me with another proposition. There were plans to expand services to include primary care and the Harbor REI Nurse Practitioner Program added a Family Nurse Practitioner arm to their program, was I willing to go back and become a Family Nurse Practitioner. I was all in.

This time around, I had a new car and a laptop. These two simple things were the true game changers that I needed to successfully complete the highly competitive program. And this was where my Mexican medical school education really helped. I applied the study habits I acquired in college and honed in Mexico and once again dug in and applied myself to the program. I was in the classroom from 8 AM to 4 PM, then I would go home, take care of the house and my girls, wash the dinner dishes, and study until 2 AM and get up at 4 AM and get ready to go back to the classroom. In the evenings and weekends, I set up my study area in the back yard and had my daughters bring their homework out and we sat in the back yard to do some serious studying. I finished the program as a Family Nurse Practitioner.

I currently work for the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services and have been there for the last 18 years. The county has also given me many opportunities. I first worked in the Diabetes Management Clinic where I participated in a two-year Robert Wood Johnson project to improve self-care in patients with diabetes. Then I trained in the Coleman Associates Patient Visit Redesign, which gave me the tools to improve clinic flow and to improve the patient experience. I redesigned the LAC+USC colonoscopy flow and improved the total cycle from two plus hours to 60 minutes. I redesigned the primary care cycle time from 2 or more hours down to 45 minutes from registration to exit within the LAC+USC cluster, which included the Edward R. Roybal Comprehensive Health Center, H. Claude Hudson Comprehensive Health Center, and El Monte Comprehensive Health Center. From then I was all about process improvement. Later I became a Black Belt in LEAN Six Sigma with even more insight into process improvement and more tools to improve patient and staff satisfaction.

Neither Fred nor I have forgotten the need to be of service to the underserved. We participated in 2 international Cervical Cancer campaigns. The first was when Fred helped coordinate a Cervical Cancer Campaign on a coffee farm in Guatemala in 2003. The other coordinator was Dr. Teresa Loya-Asturias, a pathologist from Martin Luther King Hospital. They brought together volunteers from the Los Angeles Department of Health Services, Martin Luther King Medical School, UCLA, doctors from Arizona, and Mexico to provide women's

health care and basic primary care to the residents of the coffee farm and the surrounding area. We had medical students, nurses, nurse practitioners, pathologists, cytotechs^{xx}, gynecologists and their spouses to provide one stop shopping care for the women in the area. We even had a daycare where the ladies could safely leave their children while they received their gynecological care. We repeated the model in Belize in 2007, this time with the consent and support of the Belizean government. Most of the people who went with us to Guatemala, eagerly signed on to go to Belize.

In retrospect, I am grateful for all the opportunities that have been offered to me. I don't regret having experienced any of them, although I think the Becas Para Aztlán program could have better planned and executed. Based on my experiences as well as my natural tendency to try something new, I continue to take advantage of new opportunities and advise my daughters to do the same. I have also learned to be a better, more tolerant, more patient, more inclusive person based on my Mexico City experiences.

ⁱ Becas para Aztlán program provided opportunities for Mexican-American students to pursue a graduate education in Mexico

ⁱⁱ Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana: AKA UAN; located on the outskirts of Mexico City near Xochimilco

ⁱⁱⁱ Servicio Social: a year of "giving back" to society, done after completion of medical school

^{iv} CONACYT: Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología

^v Becarios/becarias: Masculine and feminine forms in Spanish for the scholarship recipients

^{vi} Tasqueña: The name of the metro line that was closest to my house

^{vii} Pollero: A bus in poor condition

^{viii} Fichas: Index cards

^{ix} La Raza Unida: A Chicano nationalist organization

^x UNAM: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

^{xi} Pesero: A Mexican ride share

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- ^{xii} Doppler: A hand held electronic instrument used to hear the baby's heartbeat
- ^{xiii} Leopold's maneuvers: Used to determine the position of the baby through the abdomen
- ^{xiv} Breech: When the baby presents bottom first
- ^{xv} Anencephalic: The baby is missing parts of the brain and skull
- ^{xvi} ECFMG: Education Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates
- ^{xvii} RN: Registered nurse
- ^{xviii} NCLEX: National Council Licensure Exam for registered nurses
- ^{xix} ADN: Associate degree in nursing
- ^{xx} Cytotechs: Cytotechnologists are trained in examination and identification of cellular abnormalities