

# LIVING A LIFE OF SERVICE

DR. PAULA CASTILLO '90



Dr. Paula Castillo '90 and her dog Molly



Peace Corps in Belize

The therapy room where Dr. Paula Castillo '90 sits to talk about her North Shore Country Day experience is comfortable and colorful. A large Guatemalan tapestry brightens one wall and opposite to it hangs a painting of a smiling Guatemalan girl. Both are nods to Paula's heritage.

Snuggling next to her is Molly, her 15-year-old Jack Russell. Molly is a therapy dog who comforts patients during their therapy appointments at Centro Castillo for Personal and Family Wellbeing. Providing a safe and comfortable environment for patients to heal through psychotherapy has been a priority at the center ever since the NSCD alumna founded it 15 years ago.

Paula can draw a line between what she learned at North Shore and the center's mission, which in part states Centro Castillo exists to "provide culturally sensitive services to men and women of color by recognizing and appreciating the impact that one's heritage and language has on one's view of themselves and the world around them." She says North Shore's "Live and Serve" motto "is a reminder that you're supposed to be living a life of service. ... That's what we try to do here."

Paula's road to NSCD, and ultimately to Centro Castillo, began when her parents, Vilma and Gustavo Castillo, moved from Guatemala to Chicago in order to give their three children access to a higher level of education by removing some of the obstacles they themselves faced.

They had a memorable welcome to the city. Two months shy of age 7, Paula clearly recalls arriving in December during Chicago's historic blizzard of 1978.

The Castillo family settled in Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood. Her parents enrolled their children in Catholic schools, instilling discipline and good study habits along the way. When it came time for her older sister Ana Castillo Blaze '88 to attend high school, her brother Alejandro learned of a program called "A Better Chance," an organization that places high-performing students of color into some of the nation's best independent and public schools, and supports them on their journey. Each of the girls applied and was accepted to the program and to North Shore Country Day. Paula had a two-hour



Medical mission in Guatemala

**Paula can draw a line between what she learned at North Shore and the center’s mission, which in part states Centro Castillo exists to “provide culturally sensitive services to men and women of color by recognizing and appreciating the impact that one’s heritage and language has on one’s view of themselves and the world around them.”**

commute taking three CTA trains and one bus each way to get to school from Albany Park—a commute she willingly made, thanks to the strong value of education and goal-focus her parents instilled in her.

Paula says she had no idea what to expect of North Shore, but she quickly grew to appreciate what the school offered. “It allowed me a greater likelihood of taking part in a wide variety of activities.”

Paula took full advantage of that.

She was athletic, playing volleyball in the fall, basketball in the winter and swimming competitively in the spring. She says NSCD helped her develop leadership skills as well; she was class president in her junior year and vice-president of the student body in her senior year.

North Shore also nurtured her artistically. She took part in the school’s fall plays and spring musicals, and undertook choreography as dance captain. “Theater was what I thought would be my career,” she says. “Theater was my life.”

She remembers college counselor Sharon Cooper had to convince her to apply to other colleges in addition to New York University, which she had her heart set on so she could study theater. She did end up branching out and received many acceptance letters.

The seeds of her future career had arguably already been sewn. In senior year, she was expected to take part in the school’s science fair, but her family could not afford the type of materials needed for most science projects.

When she explained this to physics teacher Jan Migaki, the teacher offered her a creative solution. She challenged her to focus on psychology as a science, so Paula spent her spring break attending an all-male high school studying the effects of a female on male study habits. Paula acknowledges that Ms. Migaki did not make her feel bad but instead helped her to flourish.

She was accepted into the theater program at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, but again faced financial obstacles and had to withdraw her acceptance. She says her math teacher, Shirley Smith, found her crying in the washroom and took her to speak with Mrs. Cooper. “Mrs. Cooper called up Boston University right then and there ... and asked if my acceptance offer was still available,” she says. “They activated my acceptance and financial packet, and thus I went to Boston University.”

By the end of her freshman year in college, Paula knew she had to decide between pursuing theater or the field of psychology. Junior year psychology internships abroad in Spain and London cemented her decision, she says.

“In the end, the choice came naturally, because listening was something that came naturally to me.”

After graduating in 1994 with a major in psychology and minor in Spanish literature, Paula joined the Peace Corps, serving from 1995 to 1997 as a health educator in Belize. In 1997 she resumed her studies, graduating in 2001 from the California School of Professional Psychology with her doctorate in psychology with an emphasis on multicultural community clinical psychology.

She returned to Chicago and after four years working with children of color and wards of the state, she transitioned to the private sector. However, she grew dissatisfied with the way she saw Latinos and other people of color being treated.

For instance, she said, a patient that one of her colleagues evaluated as having cognitive disabilities was actually clinically depressed, but since English was a second and nondominant language he could not communicate that well and thus was pathologized. She also saw instances of deliberate bias that convinced her to leave.

“I went to China for my 35th birthday and spent two weeks contemplating life.

I decided I couldn’t support a practice that used the community of color just to make money. When I came back, I resigned. And six weeks later Centro Castillo started.”

Today, Paula is clinical director with a team of 14 therapists, all Spanish speaking and from different Spanish-speaking cultures, providing 11,000 clinical hours a year at three Chicago locations. That is in keeping with Paula’s desire to live and serve for Chicago’s various Latino communities: It allows patients to receive help close to home, in the language of their choice, which makes the experience less daunting.

Paula says her team supports each other, adding, “There are two parts to the mission; we’re here to support communities of color, but also to support clinicians of color.”

Outside of work, she still focuses on service. She volunteers on an annual medical mission trip to Guatemala as a translator with a faith-based organization (also allowing her to visit her parents and her 102-year old paternal grandmother). Other passions include international travel, and during the pandemic got into sewing and gardening.

When Paula looks back at her time at North Shore, she remembers what she learned from people like theater director Roger Shipley, who instilled these words of wisdom: “All you need to know is what you don’t know,” he said, because then you focus your efforts on what you need to learn, and constitutional law teacher John “Jack” Ingram, whose tough lessons taught her to “keep on trying.”

“North Shore gave me a guiding light. I truly give North Shore credit for allowing me to flourish.” 