

Learning What's Possible

2019 grad sets sights on med school

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From a very early age, Walkania “Mily” Santos '19 knew she wanted to be a doctor. What she didn't know was that she actually could become one.

Santos grew up in the Dominican Republic, in a rural province near the border of Haiti. Her father moved to the U.S. for work when she was 2. She joined him when she was 14, in the South Bronx in New York. She didn't speak English, and the High School of World Cultures that she attended was designed to educate new immigrants. When the time came to go to college, Santos was ready to leave the city behind. She visited UNH because of its strong science reputation and knew almost instantly it was where she wanted to be.

“During my internships, I saw a lot of doctors who looked just like me, and I remembered how, when I first thought about being a doctor, I didn’t know it was really possible.”

“It was a different environment,” the [biomedical science](#) major says. “In the city, everyone is in such a rush all the time, no one talks to anyone. Here, people seemed to take their time. And they were nice. I thought I would thrive here.”

And she did. While at UNH, Santos was a second-year resident hall assistant, an undergraduate teaching assistant in a biology lab, a research assistant in the chemistry department, a tutor in organic and general chemistry and a volunteer at Portsmouth Regional Hospital. She also worked a part-time job.

There aren’t a lot of white people in the Bronx, Santos says. At UNH, it was just the opposite. But it wasn’t the lack of a diverse population that she found challenging; it was the small things, like figures of speech and expressions. “I spent all of freshmen year trying to learn how to say the word ‘literally’ correctly. Everyone said it, so I wanted to use it, but I wanted to learn to use it right so I could fit in.”

That first year was hard, she says. She often felt alone and started to wonder if she should transfer. But then she thought about where she’d come from and what she’d accomplished just to get here. And she decided she already had been through harder times.

“I thought that I had the background to overcome,” says Santos, who graduated with honors in May.

The summer before her sophomore year, she completed a two-month internship at the Yale School of Medicine, taking classes and shadowing doctors at Yale New Haven Hospital. During the summer of 2018, she interned at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx.

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On June 3, a little more than two weeks after receiving her degree, Santos began a two-year research position in orthopedic surgery at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. Sometime before that job ends, she will start applying to medical school.

“I’ve known how to cook and clean since I was 10 years old. In the Dominican, every time you do something like that right, the community says you’re ready to get married. There aren’t a lot of other influences,” Santos says. “It makes me know how very lucky I am. Some of the smartest people I know got married young. They weren’t able to leave to go to college, and I could. I feel a responsibility to them to do well. If they can do that, I can do this.”

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University of New Hampshire

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