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American Academy of Pediatrics

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## Inspired by Haitian roots

### Dr. Laraque dedicates herself to the plight of those without a voice

by **Wynn St. Clair** • *Correspondent*

As a young girl in her native Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Danielle Laraque, M.D., FAAP, could see the poverty and the injustices that came with it. She wanted to heal the conditions that left people without access to food, medicine and basic necessities.

Conventional wisdom would dictate that a little girl couldn't orchestrate great change. Conventional wisdom, however, clearly did not know of Danielle Laraque's plans.

Dr. Laraque immigrated with her family to the United States at age 7, bringing with her a desire to make people's lives better. She came by her compassion naturally. Her father, Paul Laraque, was a renowned revolutionary poet whose words brought comfort and inspiration to those suffering under the Duvalier dictatorships.

"I always thought writing was wonderful but idealistic," she said. "I wanted to do something that would have an immediate impact like pediatrics. I wanted to have an impact directly on people's lives."

#### Decision leads to wide-ranging career

Though she later would come to appreciate the written word's role in medical advancements, Dr. Laraque decided to become a doctor at age 12 and never wavered. The decision would lead to a pediatric career that, indeed, has made a huge difference in the lives of children around the world.

In addition to being a past president of Academic Pediatric Association and the recently elected AAP District II chair, she is a recognized expert in injury prevention, child abuse, adolescent health risk behaviors and health care delivery in underserved communities.

"She's highly intellectual, she's hard-working and she likes to mentor young pediatricians. She's dedicated to the plight of those who have no voice," said Robert M. Corwin, a former District II chair who has known Dr. Laraque for many years.

Dr. Laraque currently serves as chair of the Department of Pediatrics and vice president of Maimonides Infants and Children's Hospital of Brooklyn, N.Y. During the past several years, she has focused on system changes to integrate the identification, diagnosis and treatment of children's mental health problems in primary care settings.

"Pediatrics is a real opportunity for primary prevention, and I've always had a facility for interacting with kids," she said. "I appreciate the opportunity to make a difference in their lives, especially when they are stressed by illness and trauma."

Often described as "Determined Danielle" as an adolescent because



Members of Dr. Laraque's family celebrate her daughter Julia's graduation from Vassar College. From left: son Marc Anthony Arena, Julia Marie Arena, husband Luigi Arena, M.D., Ph.D., and Dr. Laraque. Throughout her life, Dr. Laraque has relished the opportunity to make a difference, especially in underprivileged areas.

of her dogged pursuit of a medical career, Dr. Laraque received a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1976. With the help of the Roy Markus Scholarship, she completed medical studies there as well.

Dr. Laraque could have gone into any specialty, but she knew she was suited for pediatrics and vice versa. She liked that pediatrics required a melding of humanism and compassion with scientific advances and evidence-based medicine.

She completed an internship and residency at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, where she also was a Robert Wood Johnson General Academic Pediatrics Fellow. Her research focused on lead poisoning and calcium status in children.

Dr. Laraque also directed the joint Mount Sinai Faculty Development Program for Primary Care and Clinician Research Fellowship. Over about a decade, she trained countless fellows, residents and medical students.

Married to Luigi Arena, M.D., Ph.D., Dr. Laraque is the mother of Marc Anthony Arena and Julia Marie Arena.

#### Active in the Academy

Dr. Laraque became involved with the Academy more than two decades ago at the urging of her children's pediatrician, Richard M. Ruddy, M.D., FAAP, a longtime friend who knew about her involvement in the community and thought the Academy would benefit



On one of their excursions abroad, Dr. Laraque and her husband, Dr. Arena, traverse the top of a volcano in Sicily.

from her indefatigable nature. The suggestion led to a long-term relationship with the Academy and gave Dr. Laraque a platform to become a respected voice in the field today.

“Danielle certainly has the drive and the interest to make a difference for a lot of communities,” said Dr. Ruddy. “I told her if she was going to be in New York for a long time, it was pretty logical to get involved with District II.”

At the district level, Dr. Laraque has served as vice chair and currently is co-chair of the Children’s Mental Health and Learning Committee. At the national level, she has served as a member of the Council on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention; a member of the Mental Health Task Force and chair of its decision-support subcommittee; a member of the Vision of Pediatrics 2020 Task Force; and chair of the District Vice Chairperson Committee. She also was a U.S. Public Health Service Primary Care Policy Fellow in 2001.

In 2010, Dr. Laraque received the AAP Job Lewis Smith Award for Outstanding Achievement in Community Pediatrics.

“She works hard, and she loves to work. She’s unflinching in doing what’s right for children,” said Marie Barone Casalino, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, assistant commissioner with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Bureau of Early Intervention, who has worked with Dr. Laraque on several initiatives. “She always amazes me. She has such a good heart. She cares so much.”

### **Goals: expand access, improve quality**

As the recently elected District II chair, Dr. Laraque views ongoing health care reforms as an opportunity to expand access and improve quality. She wants to help chart the future of pediatrics by addressing the structure of the health care delivery system and the equitable payment of services. She also will promote the fostering of the medical home model and public health application of evidence-based approaches.

Such changes will take strong advocacy, engaged leadership and member recruitment, Dr. Laraque said. She relishes the opportunity to make a difference — just as she has her entire life.

“My roots in Haiti and my roots in communities that have been underprivileged have always brought the issue of access to light,” she said. “My perspective has always been one of equity. I’ve always brought that to the forefront. All people have the right to have access to quality services.”

In a selfless tribute to her roots, Dr. Laraque returned to Haiti last year following the country’s devastating earthquake. She was among the first foreign pediatricians to arrive about five weeks after the quake hit. Dr. Laraque has gone back several times since and continues to help efforts to rebuild Haitian medical schools.

“It remains the worst devastation that I have ever seen,” she said. “It was a period of great sadness for me, but I was very inspired by physicians and residents I worked with there. Many of them were homeless, and they continued to come to work because they want to make a difference.”

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