Dr. Valerie Romero-Leggott works to increase healthcare diversity

BY CINDY FOSTER

Dr. Valerie Romero-Leggott remembers her send-off to Harvard as if it were yesterday. Born in a rural part of the state, "I had never been anywhere," when she graduated with honors from Santa Fe High School. "I did have an uncle, though, who was one of the first Hispanic students to graduate from Harvard Law School and when he heard I was applying to local colleges, he made sure I also included one to his alma mater."

The family was happy and excited when she was accepted to Harvard but Romero-Leggott admits the drive to the Albuquerque airport was a long and tearful one. "I realized I was going to somewhere where I knew absolutely no one," she said.

In those pre 9/11 days, one still could walk out on the tarmac and Romero-Leggott arrived at her departure gate to find "absolutely everyone — aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors, everyone in my community came to see me off."

Family support made all the difference in adjusting to Harvard before returning to New Mexico for medical school.

"There was never any question in my mind about coming back. This state is where my community is and where I knew I wanted to make a difference."

Dr. Romero-Leggott joined the staff of the newly formed UNM Health Sciences Center Office of Diversity (OoD) in 2003. Her position was elevated to that of HSC Associate Chancellor for Diversity in 2007.

The OoD offers programs addressing faculty diversity, linguistic and cultural competence, K-20 educational pipeline, research data and analyses, family involvement/community engagement, and leadership on issues of inclusion and equity.

From the beginning, Romero-Leggott worked with others to establish a statewide presence for the office.

Each year some 300 students — from middle school through professional schools — participate in a variety of OoD programs ranging from after school science labs to summer mentoring programs where students shadow healthcare providers around the state.

"She is a visionary leader," said Paul Roth, M.D., UNM Chancellor for Health Sciences.

"What has been gratifying is the intense interest and demand from communities and families across the state," Romero said. "Parents are coming to us and the schools and saying, 'what else can I do for my child? What other programs can we bring here?'"

Recently the OoD received a $2.1 million federal grant to expand educational pipeline programs throughout the state.

"We have a waiting list of communities wanting these programs," she said. "Our goal is always to have programs become self-sustaining within three to five years. We've found local civic organizations understand their importance and are very supportive of them."

Her other hats include serving as associate dean of the School of Medicine Office of Diversity, associate professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine, and Executive Director of the UNM School of Medicine Combined BA/MD Degree Program.

"In the end, it is about educating students," Romero-Leggott said. "They are important to New Mexico. We did need to do everything in our power to encourage them to stay here."