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## Once a migrant worker, today he's a brain surgeon

Dr. Alfredo Quinones' hands used to pick produce; now they remove tumors



**By Bob Dotson**

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"Dr. Q" has a theory about how to cure cancer that he can't wait to tell me.

I look around at his lab assistants, their faces a rainbow of colors — intense, smart, listening. Their parents come from many parts of the world. Dr. Q has chosen them to test his theory: that a team of scientists from a diversity of backgrounds might find a cure for cancer more quickly, because each would see the problem differently.

The lab at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore we're all gathered in belongs to Dr. Alfredo Quinones-Hinojosa — "Dr. Q." He is one of the best brain surgeons in the world, but two decades ago, his hands were picking vegetables for \$22 a day. Quinones was a migrant worker, living under an old camper top in the middle of a California field.

"Sometimes I would cry myself to sleep thinking, 'What am I doing here?'" Quinones recalls. "I have a cousin who told me, 'You're never going to be anything but a migrant worker the rest of your life.' But it just ignited this fire in my belly."

He learned dozens of jobs, with a blazing desire to be the best at whatever life offered. It was Dr. Joe Martinez Jr. who steered him toward medicine. "Alfredo came to work in my lab his

senior year at the University of California at Berkley," Martinez recalls. "He knew nothing about the brain, but learned at an amazing rate. He was one of the two best students I ever taught."

Quinones studied math and science because he didn't have to write perfect English to do well at them. Martinez told him that with his grades, he should try for one of the very best medical schools in the country. He made it to Harvard and graduated at the top of his class.

"I think what drives Alfredo is fear," Martinez says. "Fear of failure."

"It's OK to be afraid," Quinones says. "Because you know what happens when you're afraid? You work like crazy. One thing that this country absolutely, absolutely values is hard work." And that's what he tells kids who wonder whether they can beat overwhelming odds too.

Now Dr. Q breezes into a patient's room. "Aww-right! Here's my team!" he shouts. His medical students gather around the bed. Quinones teaches them to treat all patients as friends, reminding them: "Don't forget the human side."

And Quinones tries to remember that himself. Like his patients, he has had more than his share of uncertainty and tears in his life. Many nights his mother had no food for the table because his father lost the family's gas station in Mexico. "He used to tell me, 'If you wanna be like me for the rest of your life, don't go to school,' " Quinones says.

Heeding his father's warning, Quinones graduated college at 18. He became a teacher, but found that, like his father, he was not earning enough.

So, on his 19th birthday, he clawed to the top of a 16-foot fence and jumped — illegally — to an uncertain future here in the U.S. "All I wanted to do was come in, make a little bit of money, send it back to my parents," he says.

I ask Quinones how he feels about illegal immigration today. Should we build walls? Should we keep illegal immigrants out of our schools?

"Can we build walls?" he asks rhetorically. "Sure, we're gonna build walls. Can we make 'em taller? Sure, we can make 'em taller. Would that be a solution? As long as there's poverty, and as long as people are dying of hunger in other places, it's human nature. They will try to find better ways."

Ironically, the brain surgeon followed his heart, not his brain: He became a U.S. citizen rather than return to Mexico a hero. He felt he owed this country for all the opportunity it had given him.

So now, each evening, as other doctors head home, Quinones goes to his lab, looking for clues in the brain tumors he's taken out.

"What if you never find the cure for brain cancer?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter whether you're successful or not," answers Quinones. "What matters is that you give the world the best, and the best will come back to you."

*Want to contact the subject in this morning's "American Story with Bob Dotson"? Here's the contact information:*

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