Faculty Profile: Hortensia Amaro

Hortensia Amaro knows firsthand the struggles that immigrants and minorities living in urban areas encounter as they try to carve out a life in a new, complex—and sometimes unwelcoming—country. At the age of ten, Amaro’s family forfeited everything to flee their native Cuba and for a public housing development in Los Angeles. There, Amaro became keenly aware of the obstacles that people in urban communities had to overcome to access housing, health care, education, and support services for a variety of public health issues, including substance abuse, domestic violence, and prenatal care.

“I was very impressed by Northeastern’s...practice-based philosophy of dealing with real-world problems and its commitment to the urban community.”

“My experiences growing up motivated me to pursue education so that I could help improve the health of communities through applied research,” Amaro explained. “My research has focused on the unique features of urban life that affect public health, from poverty, including reproductive health, adolescent pregnancy, childhood asthma, substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, and HIV.

The findings of one of Amaro’s recent studies, “Comorbid Disorders and History of Trauma,” which studied the effectiveness of current treatment of women substance abusers who have a history of trauma, has reshaped the intervention and treatment programs at the Boston Public Health Commission.

“The vast majority of women in treatment for substance-abuse addiction have a history of violence committed against them by their partners or family members,” said Amaro. “By treating the unyielding trauma that caused the addiction, we have shown greater improvements in mental health and reductions in drug use.”

The Mott’s Project, one of her community-based intervention programs for pregnant addicted women, received national recognition from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as part of its Models that Work Campaign. Entre Familia, a residential treatment program for Latino women and children founded by Amaro, has been lauded by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

Despite her professional success and the tremendous impact her research has had on the lives of literally thousands of people, Amaro remains characteristically modest. “I am not special,” she said. “I was fortunate to have people who believed in me, and in the worth and dignity of every individual.”