SPECIAL EDITION dedicated to
Telling Our Stories: Faces and Voices of Women and Families in Recovery

HONORING THE INHERENT WORTH & DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON
A Story of Trauma, Healing and Empowerment

By Hortensia Amaro, Ph.D.
Director, Institute on Urban Health Research
Distinguished Professor, Bouve College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University

People often ask me why I have chosen to focus my work on topics that others find depressing, such as addiction, mental illness, physical and sexual abuse, trauma, and AIDS. The answer has to do with my life journey—the experiences I had as an immigrant, living in poverty and later in a working class family.

My family came to the United States in 1960, almost 2 years after the 1959 revolution lead by Fidel Castro. We left Cuba in secrecy under the guise of going on a vacation, with no more than a suitcase each and $500 of savings that my parents had managed to hide in the lining of one of the suitcases. At the airport, surrounded by soldiers with guns, I sensed the fear that my parents and others were feeling not knowing if in fact they would be allowed to leave, whether their families would be separated. After many hours, as we finally walked to the plane, I wondered if we would now be safe. We had no idea what would happen, where we would live, what life would be like in this foreign land. As a child this was a traumatizing experience that is still vivid to me today. I realized that we had lost our home and our homeland, both of which give us a sense of safety, familiarity and confidence that we typically take for granted, until we don’t have them.

In Miami, while my parents looked for work and an apartment, my parents, two brothers and I, lived in a tiny inexpensive hotel room. During our first days, my mother heated up cans of tomato soup on a hot plate. Soon, my parents got factory work and rented a one bedroom apartment. My brother and I slept in the living room and my one-year old brother slept in my parents’ room. We had a place to live which brought some sense of safety although the future was still unknown.

At that time, Miami was a hostile place for Cuban refugees, who were populating the city through a vast immigration that could hardly be accommodated by the available housing and job market. This hostility became evident when my older brother and I started school. Everything seemed so strange and foreign including the sounds of English and the strange smell of American food in the cafeteria. The teachers and kids made no attempts to communicate with us. I felt invisible. I had no idea of what was happening around me and I spent whole school days trying to figure out what we were supposed to be doing. After the final school day bell would ring, we would often have to run home because kids would chase us and pick fights. During this very vulnerable time in my life, I also experienced abuse by an uncle and it took me years to recognize it, speak about it and heal from it.

(continues on page 2)
Honoring the Inherent Worth & Dignity of Every Person
A Story of Trauma, Healing and Empowerment (cont'd. from page 1)

After 6 months in Miami, my parents decided to move to Los Angeles through the sponsorship of an Episcopal church who helped my parents with an apartment, find jobs and enroll in English classes. Equally important was the friendship they extended to us. Soon going to visit the home of one of the families that we became friends with was a regular part of our weekly event. These were simple, hard working Americans who believed that everyone deserved a chance to be successful, who believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For the first time, I started to feel that I was welcomed and that I could someday belong to this new place. Suddenly, we weren't alone in this journey.

Upon entering the 4th grade in Los Angeles, I was blessed to be assigned to a classroom of an American teacher who spoke some Spanish. I was relieved to be able to speak in Spanish to her and that she allowed me to do my assignments in Spanish until I learned English over the course of that year. Many of the Latin American children in my class and African American children in my classes during elementary school also lived in the public housing development in which I quickly developed friendships.

But one day not long after I had arrived in Los Angeles, I was given what I now know to be a standardized intelligence test. Because I could barely speak English at the time, I scored low on this test and was placed in a special education class. At my father's advocating, I was retested in middle school when I was fluent in English, and was placed in college preparatory classes.

I had marvelous teachers who encouraged and supported me, but also had teachers who ignored me and assumed I was not bright because I was Latina. During my last year of high school when all students were getting ready to apply to college, despite my decent grades and school leadership activities, a counselor discouraged me from going to college and suggested I become a secretary. I felt ashamed because the counselor had managed to communicate her low opinion of my potential. I ended up following in my brother's footsteps and enrolled in community college, while I worked as a waitress.

It was from friends and my counselor in junior college that I learned about transferring to a university. It was the time of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War and I became involved in student activities while in junior college that helped me to learn and understand some of the experiences I had had as an immigrant Latina.

I eventually transferred to the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) with a full scholarship and financial aid. I became involved in activities in the Chicano Movement on campus, began doing volunteer community work with Mexican families and worked with other students to help advocate for increasing minority student enrollment and hiring of minority faculty at UCLA. Through these activities and classes, I learned leadership skills and things that helped me to formally understand principles of social justice and my experiences as an immigrant.

I received my Bachelor's degree, with honors, at UCLA and published a scientific paper based on my senior thesis. I had decided that I wanted to study psychology and applied to the doctoral program in clinical psychology at UCLA. I had an A-grade point average, good graduate entrance exam scores, a published honors study, and significant community volunteer work. Yet, I was not accepted into the program, which I later found out had only accepted one Latino student in its history. Subsequently, I applied and was accepted into the developmental psychology program at UCLA because I had met and worked with the only Latino professor that was on the faculty in that department.

I do not see myself as special or unique amongst the kids I grew up with in the housing development. I am simply one of the few people whom because of the generosity and goodwill of teachers and other people who helped my family, managed to have the opportunity to develop my interests and talents. Some may explain my success by thinking that I was the exception—that somehow there was something different about me. But my lived experience with the kids I grew up with tells me that this is not the case, there is nothing more special about me than there is with each of you.

What is special is that I was blessed to have people in my life who believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, people who communicated this belief to me and thereby enabled me to develop skills, self-confidence and ability so that I could discover my dreams and fulfill them. What would be the possibilities if we would be able to see the inherent worth and dignity in every person and provide encouragement and support to help them reach their dreams?

So, back to the question of why my work has been with drug addicted and abused women. Perhaps the best answer is that through my own life experience, I witnessed and experienced the ways in which society marginalizes and blames some groups of people: the poor, those of color, immigrants, those we consider failures, those who for whatever life circumstances become addicted to drugs, the mentally ill and even those who are victims of domestic violence. I saw the loss of human potential and suffering that marginalization brings.

Through my work, my commitment has been to do things that contribute to giving voice to those who are marginalized and silenced by society—to do work that communicates my belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being—especially to those whom society generally discards. This commitment comes from my own lived experience as an immigrant in this country. Understanding and embracing my own personal journey including the traumas, fears, and doubts as well as the strengths, persistence and values that my experiences instilled in me takes a lot of personal reflection and work. In looking closely at my life journey, I have recognized how critical it has been to have people who believe in me—some of them many not even realize the impact they had on me.

I believe that whether we are service providers, administrators, elected officials or women in recovery, if we look closely at our life journey, we will recognize the empowering influence that those who believed in us have had on us. We are better able to see the power we have in choosing to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person.