Laredo’s History: A Medical Perspective

Interviewers: Annalis Cigarroa, Daniela Borrego
Interviewee: Dr. Joaquin Gonzalez Cigarroa

Annalis Cigarroa: Were you born in Laredo, and if not, how long have you lived here?
Dr. Joaquin Cigarroa: I was born in San Antonio, Texas and I moved to Laredo when I was approximately eleven years of age and I have lived here since 1937, approximately fifty-one years.

Daniela Borrego: What was Laredo’s community like when you first moved?
Dr. J.C: Pardon.
Both D.B and A.C: What was Laredo’s community like when you first moved?
A.C: Was it big community, small…?
Dr. J.C: When I came to Laredo it had a population of about thirty thousand and at that time all the streets were unpaved. They had a small hospital with about twenty beds. There were very few doctors in Laredo at that time they had about one doctor for three thousand people whereas the average in the country is about one per four hundred people.

A.C: Was Laredo advanced medically?
Dr. J.C: Pardon.
A.C: Was Laredo advanced medically, did you have a lot of technology in the hospitals?
Dr J.C: We had a good x-ray department and we had a good laboratory, but we didn’t have the technology as we know it, it has advanced considerably. The laboratory was just a little one room structure.

D.B: Growing up did you always know you wanted to be a doctor? Why?
Dr. J.C: I’ve always known that I wanted to be a doctor since elementary school. I started following my fathers footsteps and helped out in his office, in the hospital, back when I was about eight years of age.

A.C: Was Laredo an encouraging environment in pursuing higher education?
Dr. J.C: Laredo back in the year [pause] 1968 was barren of higher education. There were very few facilities here. There was no four year university in a hundred and fifty mile radius so most Laredoans did not receive higher education degrees. At that time I would hazard an approximate guess that there were ten percent of high school graduates that went on to college. Now, I don’t have the exact statistics but I would imagine that it would be somewhere around twenty and twenty five percent because we were able to attain a four year university.

D.B: What colleges did you attend?
Dr. J.C: Pardon
D.B: [in a louder voice] What colleges did you attend?
Dr. J.C: I went to the University of Texas for my pre-medical education in Austin and from there I went to the Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts and then
I went to the University of Chicago clinics for my internships and then my residency specialty training, I did it at the Boston City Hospital at the Harvard Medical Unit in Boston.

A.C: So overall that was how many years was that of […] being a student?
Dr. J.C: Oh yes and then I spent a year in medical research at the in Memorial Hospital at Harvard and then I spent two years doing research with a team from Walter Medical Center at Harvard Medical School doing Hepatitis research in Kyoto, Japan. I also had the opportunity to visit Kyoto University and to interrelate with professors and physicians at Kyoto University.

A.C: Did you always want to return to Laredo and give back to the community?
Dr .J.C: Yes, I always felt that there was a need in our area for more physicians more of all types of health professionals. Yes because I always felt in my mind that a physician better go to an area in need than an area where there is an abundance because I felt that you can do more for people if you go to an area in need rather than to a city where there are many hospitals, many physicians, many nurses, many universities and then my family was here so that was a huge plus [smiles]. So I don’t think there was any doubt in my mind that I wanted to come back.

D.B: When you came back, what did you want to see change?
Dr. J.C: Things that I wanted were better education for our youngsters, more opportunities for our youngsters, better preparation so that when you go to college there is no dropping out, in other words, for a student to go to college and be able to finish four years of college in four years not seven or eight or nine years, that sometimes happens.

D.B: How did you work in changing these things?
Dr. J.C: Well first of all I wanted people to be better educated and when I came here there were still the curanderas who would treat the patients, there were still the midwives who would deliver babies and that is not the equivalent of a person with a college degree, with a medical school degree, and with anywhere between four to seven years of specialty training.

A.C: When did you first meet your wife?
Dr. J.C: [smiling] I met my wife in 1953, no 1954. I met her around April and I married her in October. [D.B and A.C chuckle] It was a short courtship.

A.C: Did raising ten kids interfere with work or were they very supportive?
Dr. J.C: No, everybody was very supportive. It was work but it was enjoyable work and it was very rewarding because I saw a lot of happiness in raising them with my wife, who did most of the raising, but I would always spend lunch, I would always go home for lunch so I could be with them, all ten of them at the dinner table and be able to see what they were doing and discuss issues with them [Dr. J.C.’s phone begins ringing softly at first and growing steadily louder. He ignores it until he is finished with the question] whether they be local issues, national issues, international issues, health, history, so they were great years.
A.C: Do you want to get your phone?
[Dr. Joaquin answers the phone and talks for a couple of minutes. The interview continues after the short break.]

D.B: Today would you say Laredo is advanced in the medical field?
Dr. J.C: Yes, we now have many specialties represented in Laredo. We have cardiologists, interventional cardiologists, we have neurologists, we have neurosurgeons, we have cancers specialists: oncologists, we have hematologists, we have orthopedists, pediatricians, and neonatologists, pulmonologists, and all of this did not exist when we first came to Laredo in 1937.

A.C: Is there anything Laredo needs to put more effort in such as better health care?
Dr. J.C: I think that there’s very good health care in Laredo since that we have the advantage of having three hospitals and we have the advantage of having most technology and we have the advantage of having caring physicians because there was a famous physician at Harvard, Francis Peabody, that said that the secret in the care of a patient, is caring about the patient and that is so true and fortunately we see that in Laredo. It may have been lost in some other areas and in some cities and in some physicians but by and large we see the love for the patient, we see the caring about the patient, and if you care about the patient you give your all to that person.

D.B: Do you see Laredo’s youth as becoming leaders in the medical industry?
Dr. J.C: Oh yes, certainly. Right now I would say that we have leaders in the state and leaders in the nation. We have physicians practicing here that are on a par with every other city. There is some technology that we don’t have, that only large cities can have. For example, we can not do transplant surgery here. We need a much more supportive technology in order to be able to do that, eventually we will get there.

A.C: That was our last question, thank you.

Dr. J.C: Oh thank you very much for the opportunity to be able to describe some of my thoughts to you and I can tell you that medicine is a calling, it’s not a situation in which you do it for any other reason than wanting to help people. It’s a calling that you find within you and you get a tremendous amount of happiness and satisfaction and joy not only in understanding disease process, but in being able to apply what you know about those disease processes to see people get better.