

## Donning the white coat: Students take Hippocratic Oath to signal start of Medical School journey

BY MEREDITH RAINE

**M**ore than 200 students got their first lesson in what it takes to be humanists dedicated to practicing the art of medicine Aug. 10 during The University of Texas Medical School at Houston's annual White Coat Ceremony.

Larry C. Gilstrap III, M.D., recipient of the 2005 Leonard Tow Humanism in Medicine Award, said humanism is a quality all physicians should embrace, as compassion and sensitivity toward patients and their families are essential to the healing process.

"Remember you are here for the patients," said Dr. Gilstrap, chair of the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences. "They are not here for you."

The ceremony, sponsored by the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, has been a rite of passage for first-year students at the UT Medical School since 1996.

Before hundreds of family and friends, the students signed an ethical pledge and took the Oath of Hippocrates at the Texas Medical Center Edwin Hornberger Conference Center. As a symbol of their commitment to excellent patient care, they also donned their white coats for the first time.

The 210 new students will spend the next four years learning the intricate details of medicine before they become physicians and enter residency.

Diana Mercado, 23, of Mission, a small Texas town near the border, said she has been preparing for this moment since she was a sophomore in high school. While participating that summer in an Upward Bound program, she was introduced to medicine and laboratory science.

"After that I knew I wanted to be a doctor, so I started taking science classes to prepare myself," said Mercado, who majored in biology and minored in chemistry at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. She also started doing community service and taking note of health-care disparities.

"It is very underserved. The health care is inadequate, and there are few Hispanic doctors," Mercado said. "I understand the culture. I speak the language. I want to go back and provide health care to these patients who need it the most."



*The entering class partakes of the annual white coat tradition.*

Like Mercado, Flor Limas, 23, will be the first doctor in her family. Growing up in Mexico, her father always told her to pursue what made her happy. She knew it would be a struggle to become a physician, but she knew helping and caring for patients is truly what would make her the happiest.

Limas spoke almost no English when she moved to the United States and enrolled in the pre-medicine program at the University of Texas-Pan American. She learned the language and the culture, earned her degree in biology, and applied to the UT Medical School. "I'm so happy that I was accepted here," Limas said. "It was my first choice."

Limas was one of 31 students who participated in the UT Medical School pre-entry program this summer. She said the program helped prepare her for what comes next as a first-year medical student.

"I'm ready for the next step," she said.

As students take the next step toward becoming physicians, Dr. Gilstrap advised them to empower their patients. The patients are the boss and have the control. You work for them, he said.

Dr. Gilstrap said that wasn't always his philosophy. Early in his residency, he said, it's unlikely anyone would have considered him a humanist and given him an award for it. He was arrogant and sometimes insensitive to the needs of his patients.

Nurses taught him that a patient's everyday needs such as dental work and a new hairdo were important to a patient being treated for ovarian cancer. He also learned humanism from his patients, who could smile in the face of leukemia and 2 a.m. treatments.

Stanley Schultz, M.D., dean of the UT Medical School, said physicians must exercise care, compassion, and a genuine respect for the human spirit and cultural diversity.

"I implore you as you progress in your studies, don't ever treat your patients like case numbers – a disease in need of a cure," said Dr. Schultz, who will teach the students physiology in their first year of medical school. "They are people who have feelings, loved ones, and aspirations. Become a healer, not a repairman."