Growing up in Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican neighborhood in Chicago, Nereida Esparza rarely visited doctors. Her family had no health insurance, and immunizations came from community health fairs. The family, with first-generation American children born to Mexican immigrants, turned to emergency rooms for care when they had health problems.

When Esparza was 15 years old, her grandfather became seriously ill and she became a de facto interpreter in the hospital, translating medical information as best she could. The experience changed her perspective on health care. Esparza, who was the valedictorian of her high school class, decided to pursue medicine as a career.

Nine years later, she is analyzing the effectiveness of medical interpreters at the University of Chicago Medical Center. As a third-year student in the Pritzker School of Medicine, Esparza has become a leader in her class, particularly on issues related to health disparities and minority health care. She was one of five medical students nationwide recently honored by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) for “leadership in efforts to eliminate inequities in medical education and health care” and “addressing educational, societal and health care needs of minorities in the United States.”

Esparza attended the University of Chicago as an undergraduate in biology—and a commuter student. She lived with her mom, who had by then moved to Berwyn. In addition to the heavy academic workload in the college, she worked 10 to 20 hours a week as a research assistant at Hines Veterans Affairs Hospital, about 12 miles southwest of Chicago. As an assistant in a urology lab, she learned about the biology of stress urinary incontinence in women. The research led to several publications in medical journals—an unusual accomplishment for an undergraduate student—but Esparza also was thinking about the effects of the condition on patients’ quality of life.

With a commute to and from school, Esparza struggled to fit into campus life. As graduation grew near, she reconsidered the university for medical school.

“When I came to Pritzker, the attitude was different,” Esparza said. By the time she was accepted to Pritzker, she said, “I wanted to become part of my school community and my bigger community.”

The faculty members who met Esparza also saw great potential in her. She was one of the first students to receive the Department of Medicine’s Exceptional Promise scholarship, which provides $10,000 in support for four years, along with mentorship and guidance from several faculty members.

At the beginning of medical school, Esparza moved to Hyde Park, joined the National Network of Latin American Medical Students and got involved with the Multicultural Community
for Academic Advancement in Medicine. She also reached out to minority high school students to introduce them to health professions as a coordinator in the Health Professions Recruitment and Exposure Program.

Monica Vela, MD, was one of the faculty members who selected Esparza to receive the Exceptional Promise scholarship, started by former Department of Medicine Chairman Joe G.N. "Skip" Garcia, MD. Vela has been one of Esparza's champions during medical school. "She's one of my personal mentors and one of the people who pushes me a lot," Esparza said.

Vela, assistant professor of Medicine and associate vice chair for diversity for the Department of Medicine, wrote one of Esparza's recommendations for the AAMC award.

"Through her own initiative, Nereida and another student have provided health education to a Chicago community in great need of medical services," Vela wrote. "She presented health facts pertaining to diabetes to the employees of Casa Central, a community in the Humboldt Park neighborhood, which has rates of diabetes approaching 40 percent among its adults."

Vela added that the experience was "especially meaningful to Nereida, who felt that in those moments, she was having a conversation with family members. She has had a meaningful and significant impact on this community."

Esparza has tried to help other students understand common difficulties that Hispanics in the United States may face with health care. She notes that her mom, a longtime U.S. resident, doesn't have health insurance. In fact, many Hispanics, Esparza said, don't know how to access health care available in federally qualified health centers, community clinics or through sliding-scale payment plans at some medical practices.

Her life as the daughter of immigrants has driven some of her research as well. She shadowed the Medical Center's two Spanish-language interpreters and collected surveys from doctors, nurses and patients about the interpretation services. The Medical Center's onsite interpreters are the direct result of the research of former medical student, Pilar Ortega—now MD and a resident in Emergency Medicine. Ortega studied the hospital's use of interpreters from outside agencies and recommended hiring full-time employee interpreters. The Medical Center did hire two interpreters, and Esparza has been looking at how satisfied faculty, staff and guests are with the services. In her observations so far, Esparza has seen that the full-time interpreters stay busy—but that many staff members aren't aware of the service.

Esparza's main research project in 2007 took her into the world of local community health clinics, where she interviewed physicians about their experiences. "They thought they were providing the best care they could," she said. But she also heard about the problems they faced: the lack of equipment or staff, trouble getting their patients to specialty care and a dearth of financial resources.

That research led under the Medical Center's Urban Health Initiative, which brings community clinics into closer contact with the hospital to gauge patient needs, connect local healthcare practices with specialists and encourage neighborhood residents to seek primary care physicians to maintain better overall health.

Meeting with doctors practicing medicine in community clinics reinforced Esparza's drive to work in underserved communities. "It just really solidified where I want to go," she said. "I've always wanted to do primary care."

Esparza is immersed in clinical rotations this year. She's worked through surgery, pediatrics and family medicine shifts. "I am trying to keep an open mind during my third-year clerkships," she said. But she is anxious for her internal medicine rotation.

Associate professor of Anesthesia and Critical Care William McDade, MD, PhD, is one of the faculty members who has overseen Esparza's research. McDade also serves as the Pritzker School of Medicine's associate dean for Multicultural Affairs. He and Vela recommended Esparza for the AAMC award, which includes a $5,000 scholarship.

"Nereida is driven to help communities in which English is not the primary language gain equitable, compassionate and safe care in U.S. hospitals," McDade wrote in his recommendation letter. "When she was admitted to the Pritzker School of Medicine, we knew we had a strong mind to accompany a young woman passionate to help her community."