

# Dr. Omaida Velazquez Honored as Latina Pioneer of the Year

Omaida Velazquez, M.D., chair of the DeWitt Daughtry Family Department of Surgery at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, was honored as the Latina Pioneer of the Year at the 20th annual Hispanic Women of Distinction Charity Awards Luncheon held Sept. 10 at the Signature Grand in Davie.



Dr. Omaida Velazquez, right, receives the Latina Pioneer of the Year Award during the Sept. 10 ceremony.

A celebration of Latinas in South Florida, the event honors 12 women and one pioneer of the year of Hispanic ethnicity who abides by what the organization stands for in inspirational community service intertwined with culture. Dr. Velazquez stood out in receiving the honor due to her contributions in the vascular field, an area that she has focused on throughout

her career, managing and growing many surgical clinical care programs, advancing research, contributing to surgical education, and giving back to the community.

“It’s extremely humbling to be a recipient of this award,” Dr. Velazquez said. “This foundation has a rigorous and competitive process composed of a panel of super accomplished women in the community that look at all these applications. To be the one medical doctor in the group is an honor, but to be a pioneer was a big mix of emotions – totally unexpected.”

## **Medical Standout**

Born in Cuba, Dr. Velazquez knew medicine would be her calling and made the most of her opportunities when she arrived in the U.S. in her teens. After attending college, she graduated valedictorian from Rutgers New Jersey Medical School and went on to complete a general surgery residency and fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania in vascular/endovascular surgery, achieving her dreams.

Dr. Velazquez joined the Miller School in 2007, where she began as the chief of the Vascular and Endovascular Division. She then held various roles as a professor with tenure, including vice chair for research in the Department of Surgery; executive dean of research; inaugural Surgeon-in-Chief for both the University of Miami and Jackson Health Systems; and most recently as the chair of the Department of Surgery where she made history as the first Latina in the U.S. to hold that position.



The 12 Women of Distinction and Dr. Omaida Velazquez, the Latina Pioneer of the Year, at the Hispanic Women of Distinction Charity Awards Luncheon.

“The world has evolved to understand diversity, equity, and inclusion matter,” Dr. Velazquez said. “Hispanic and Latinx communities have so much to offer. We bring the context that makes us unique while we enrich and complement our communities. That is why it’s important to have our voices at the table.”

Dr. Velazquez’s most recent achievements include rebuilding the Division of Cardiac Surgery to its present state as the largest program by volume in the state. The residency programs continue to reach new heights, attracting competitive residents and significantly advancing the diversity of the programs – now close to 50% women trainees and with increasing URIM representation.

From the research end, Dr. Velazquez is most proud of working with Dr. Zhao-Jun Liu, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of surgery, in patenting a new gene therapy and gene-modified cell therapy to foster vascular regeneration and healing,

promising future new vascular cures and credited to the University of Miami.



Dr. Velazquez (center) with daughter Julia Caridad Cuy, and her husband Dr. Romulo Montesa Cuy.

“This award encompasses all the great work Dr. Velazquez has done throughout the Health System and community,” said Dipen J. Parekh, M.D., chief operating officer and chair of the Department of Urology. “Her contributions to lowering the statistics of amputees due to vascular diseases, various leadership appointments, and commitment to patients have made her a standout throughout South Florida.”

“Dr. Velazquez’s passion and commitment are evident in all facets of her work, from research to medical education,” said

Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School of Medicine. “Embracing one’s passion and using it to make a difference in the community and lives of others is a trait every physician needs to have, and one Dr. Velazquez greatly exhibits.”

## **Beyond Medicine**

Aside from her work in health care and involvement in various medical organizations, Dr. Velazquez has made sure she supports multiple community efforts. She is involved with several non-profits for the underserved in Dade County, such as Camullus House, the Church of the Little Flower Homeless Ministries, and the Miami Rescue Mission.

Dr. Velazquez’s reach also extends to her adopted hometown in New Jersey. She serves on the Advisory Board for the Jose Marti STEM Academy in Union City, New Jersey, which provides academic scholarships and opportunities for Hispanic students.

While the recognition is one that Dr. Velazquez greatly embraces, her passion for medicine and the ability to impact lives both in and outside the field is a reward she says she gets to experience daily.

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