Mily Santos

In the far northwest corner of the Dominican Republic bordering Haiti, nestled next to a blue-green sea, lies the municipality of Monte Cristi. This rural community was the early home of Walkania (Mily) Santos, a UNH senior who draws upon her roots to fuel her aspirations to become a physician. “They started building a hospital there in 1995 that is really only a clinic now. The nearest hospital was nearly two hours away in Santiago. If someone was in a serious accident, we just assumed that they would die,” Mily explained. Imagine growing up in this rural Caribbean setting on the fringes of poverty until early adolescence, and then moving to the South Bronx of New York City. “My father moved to the U.S. for work opportunities when I was two years old,” she said. “I didn’t see him again until I was 8.” In New York, Mily entered the High School of World Cultures for “new arrival” students who came from more than 30 countries. “My school was full of gangs. Getting into my school was like going into an airport security. Guards were everywhere. There were so many distractions around me.”

Despite her chaotic school environment and drastic changes in home life, Mily picked up English quickly, nurtured her love for science, and pursued her dreams of a career in medicine. She did well in school, but felt the need to escape New York to make those dreams a reality. “I was looking for strong sciences and UNH was so welcoming,” Mily said about her first visit. “I’m not a city girl, and this was so different from the Bronx. Everyone was so polite!” she said. Mily quickly plunged into life at UNH and found her academic footing as a biomedical science major. She was recruited by Student Support Services as a first-year TRIO Scholar. “What truly inspired me was Erica Bradley, my TRIO counselor at UNH,” Mily said. “She mentored and encouraged me to go after opportunities.” After Mily’s very first year at UNH, she was accepted as a Summer Health Professions Intern at the Yale University School of Medicine. She shadowed physicians at Yale New Haven Hospital, took introductory science and public health courses, absorbed deep knowledge from Yale medical students and took weekly seminars on public health. This preceded another intensive internship at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx in the summer of 2018. There she shadowed and soaked up as much as she could about vascular surgery and cardiology cases, gynecologic procedures and cardiology cases, along with a wide range of supplemental roles that enhanced this educational adventure.

“I am certain now that I want to become the doctor that my community needed. I want to be able to help here and help at home.”

A warmth and calm energy belie Mily’s intense schedule: 20 to 30 hours a week working at Wildcatters, a rigorous academic course load and an immersion in experiences to build on her path to medical school. Mily also serves as a second-year Resident Assistant, a position that provides room and board at UNH, but also an expectation of 20 hours per week as a paraprofessional. All of this is in addition to assisting in research in a Chemistry Department lab, volunteering, student organization commitments, and tutoring chemistry students. Mily was also one of four selected for the Marble Scholarship by her College of Life Sciences and Agriculture. Marble Scholars serve as ambassadors for the college at various events; it is a prestigious award and an elite honor.

Mily holds a natural talent for drawing in an array of wise mentors, smart and savvy guides who have steered her well and encouraged her academic and professional paths. Even though she has been fully immersed in upper-level courses like Pathogenic Microbiology and the Biochemistry of Cancer, Mily’s CYOS nomination was penned outside of her science world by UNH English Professor Petar Ramadanovic, who had Mily in his Critical Approaches to Literature class. “He was honest from the beginning that English was not his first language either, and I so appreciated that understanding. He also made sure to challenge me with my writing.” Professor Ramadanovic noted that Mily’s “long-term goal is to become a well-equipped and culturally competent physician, (so) she attended my ENGL 619 that covers various theoretical approaches to diverse cultural issues. Her dream is to increase access to healthcare for the underserved on a local and global scale.”

Mily will graduate with honors in May 2019. She has been interviewing at sites that would give her additional clinical experiences with extensive patient contact, but also admits that there are things that she wants to do before beginning the lifelong journey into healing individuals and creating systemic changes in healthcare. With great clarity, she said, “I just want to be emotionally and physically prepared for the grueling journey of medical school.”