

MEET DR. BRIDGET MARTINEZ:

ALUMINA *of the* YEAR

Fast Facts

HORATIO ALGER SCHOLARSHIPS:

2007 State Scholar from California
2014 Dennis Washington Leadership
Graduate Scholar

DEGREES:

MD, PhD

LANGUAGES:

English, Spanish, Arabic, French, Italian,
Japanese, Korean, American Sign Language,
Currently learning: Russian, Basque

NUMBER OF SCHOLARSHIPS AND GRANTS RECEIVED:

21

AUTHOR OF:

44 peer-reviewed articles and 4 books





CHILDHOOD YEARS

Bridget Martinez was born and raised in Southern California. Her mother emigrated from Guatemala and settled in California, seeking a better life for her young family. Tragically, Bridget's father was murdered, leaving her mother alone to care and provide for her and her older brother. Her mother, having only a third-grade education, made her living cleaning houses and has been Bridget's inspiration in her pursuit of life goals. For much of Bridget's childhood, she lived in a one-bedroom apartment with her mother and brother plus two uncles and an aunt.

To get some relief from her overcrowded living conditions, Bridget often went to the hallway between the parking garage and the apartment complex to play quietly on her own. From early girlhood, she was drawn to science and medicine, and she enjoyed pretending the hallway was her laboratory. She also tied a rope around

her waist to hold a homemade first-aid kit—just in case her healing skills were ever needed.

Bridget often accompanied her mother to clean houses. These experiences vividly demonstrated to her the stark differences between her life and that of her mother's clients. In these homes, she saw the latest toys, art sets, and computers. She felt like she was on the outside looking into a world she could only glimpse, a world she could only dream of.

At one point, Bridget's mother suffered a broken arm in a car accident. Later that week, Bridget went with her mother to clean a house and watched as her mother struggled to clean a toilet with her arm in a cast, while eight months pregnant. Bridget had always been inspired by her mother's strong work ethic, and she decided that day that she would do all she could to improve her mother's life.



Recently, Bridget interviewed with Strive and Succeed and shared her journey from the time she received her Horatio Alger scholarship to where she is today—a physician and scientist.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHERE TO GO TO COLLEGE?

I was the first in my family to attend college. My PSAT scores put me in the 97th percentile, and I received an offer to apply to and attend Harvard. I was so excited, but when I discovered the tuition costs, I realized I couldn't afford to go there. I remember wondering at the time how other people were able to afford that. I remember being so confused; I had worked so hard and had good grades. Why couldn't I go to Harvard? I did not let that deter me from achieving my dreams, though. I attended community college with the help of the Horatio Alger scholarship and later transferred to the University of California at Merced.

HOW WAS YOUR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE?

It was a big struggle. Money was really an issue for me and I had to work to pay my way. I worked the graveyard shift at Kaiser Permanente, which was an hour from my school. I had an unreliable car that broke down all the time. It seemed like I was always tired. By the time I would drive home at 5:00 a.m., I would catch myself falling asleep. I would call my mother and have her talk to me to help me stay awake until I reached home. She would tell me jokes and sometimes she would share old memories of my dad. We talked about anything and everything.

HOW WAS YOUR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE?

That was much better. That's when my life started to change dramatically. For one thing, I had learned how to take advantage of opportunities. I would ask myself what it is I wanted, and then I made a plan to get it. I was very passionate about wanting to travel the world while I was in school. I got a job with my school's Education Abroad Program. While I talked to other students about the incredible study abroad possibilities, I personally would become the program's poster child! By the time I graduated, I had studied abroad and/or done research in eight countries.

When I was in community college, I studied astronomy in Italy—just out in the open with a telescope. In university, I studied physics in Egypt for a year, which is

where I learned Arabic. I also did research and studied biochemistry in Korea. I did smaller research projects across Europe, New Zealand, and Mexico and then spent a year in Japan on a larger project. I found funding for all of these opportunities through scholarships. That's what my Horatio Alger scholarship taught me: Fortune favors those that are brave enough to try!

I received my doctorate in comparative endocrinology. My research involved studying the elephant seal, which is an animal that becomes insulin resistant during its lifetime. For humans, that is a problem, but for an elephant seal it is beneficial. My research was focused on trying to understand diabetes. As a director's-funded post-doc, I also did a fellowship at the national laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where I studied a unique way to measure the structural dynamics of cancer cells. Now, as a medical doctor, I am specializing in primary care. As a physician/scientist, I will strive to bridge the gap between the advancement of scientific knowledge and improve therapeutic strategies for my patients.

ARE YOU DONE WITH DEGREES?

No! Though I currently hold two doctoral degrees, I do not necessarily see them as just degrees but rather fields in which I hold a certain level of expertise in areas that I am passionate about.

Being in Reno, I recently learned about the Center for Basque Studies, which has become the leading research and educational institute for Basque research outside of the European Basque homeland. The Basques are a unique people with a language that isn't tied to any other in the world. Another anomaly is the fact that they have a large incidence of Rh-negative blood.

A great deal of data on this population is housed at the university, but it's all in Spanish and Basque. I want to be the one to figure out why their blood is so unique. I am fluent in Spanish, so that is not a problem, but Basque is challenging. I think this puzzle is perfect for my skill set and I am excited about it. It's something I want to know more about and understand, however, since the answers don't exist, I plan to complete another doctoral dissertation that elucidates this unique physiological adaptation.

Dr. Bridget Martinez, MD, PhD

“I will strive to bridge the gap between the advancement of scientific knowledge and improve therapeutic strategies for my patients”



WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU WILL BE DOING FIVE YEARS FROM NOW?

I want to practice medicine in my own clinic. I hope to set up clinics around Reno, pursuing my strength, which is endocrinology—especially diabetes and thyroid disorders. I also want to start a privately funded company that will invest in medical and scientific research focusing on new-standard-of-care devices and therapies.

DO YOU HAVE A MESSAGE FOR OTHER HORATIO ALGER SCHOLARS AND ALUMNI?

I have been blessed because from an early age I have known that I am passionate about medicine and scientific research and what my calling is. I believe that the earlier you figure that out, the better. But for a lot of people, that's a struggle.

I am hoping that my story will inspire others to discover or rediscover their passions and avoid getting sidetracked by life's challenges. If you don't know your passion, I suggest going back to when you were a child, when you didn't have so many limitations put on you, when you let your imagination take you wherever you wanted to go. Rediscover what you were passionate about at that time. Hopefully, this exercise will reveal your passion and what you were meant to do. Throughout all my struggles, I never lost sight of my dreams.

AS A STATE SCHOLAR, YOU DID NOT ATTEND THE SCHOLARS CONFERENCE WHEN YOU WERE A HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR IN 2007. EVEN SO, YOU HAVE STAYED INVOLVED WITH THE ASSOCIATION. WHY?

I've always been intrigued by the level of care the Horatio Alger Association shows its scholarship recipients. I have received other awards, but nothing compares to the loving, nurturing environment of the Association. I applied for and won the Dennis

Washington Leadership Graduate Scholarship, which paid for much of my graduate work. That experience brought me into contact with so many people who are doing such interesting things. It inspired me all over again.

In 2017, I was an attendee at the Alumni Global Leadership Summit, which reinforced all my previous notions about the work of the Association. Now I am serving as the Field Director for Nevada. This has put me in a position where I am able to give back to an organization that has given me so much. Now I have an opportunity to reach out to students who are struggling and tell them about the Association. I tell them it is much more than a scholarship; that isn't how it works. It's a family that never stops caring about you.

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