

Puerto Rican student hunts the coronavirus in Cuba

Ishaira Nieto Rosas is part of the army of medical students who, house by house, look for potential cases

Havana, Cuba - One of the silent strengths of the Cuban health system is its complex disease detection system, which runs like veins through the body among the island's towns and neighborhoods, seeking someone to heal.

This system, with its lights and shadows, of course, is today the mainstay of the fight against the new coronavirus, as it pursues potential cases of COVID-19 at the community level, so that they are tackled before they become a potential massive focus of infection.

This work leads to the fact that most of the residences in Cuba are visited daily by health personnel, who ask if there are sick people, be it with any pre-existing condition or, above all, with any flu or feverish symptoms. If a case is found, an intervention protocol is activated that could end in the person's preventive hospitalization, depending on the case.

In the days of COVID-19, this detection work, called here the screening, was reborn in the nearly 28,000 medical students in Cuba, whether national or foreign, and among that army is a Puerto Rican, a native of Guánica, but resident in Hartford, Connecticut.

Her name is Ishaira Nieto Rosas, she is 28 years old and she is from the La Luna neighborhood, where she grew up until she was eight years old, when her parents moved to Connecticut. She studied Biology and Latin American Studies at Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, New York, and three years ago entered the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana, Cuba.

Since the COVID-19 emergency broke out, the students have been deployed to go through the houses to look for people at potential risk, either because of their age or their conditions, as well as who has shown any flu-like symptoms.

According to the figures of the Ministry of Public Health, the work of these young people is extremely important, because they detect around 20,000 people daily with some respiratory symptom, albeit minimal, which allows thousands of family doctors spread throughout the island (in Cuba there are about 90.00 doctors working), differentiate the clinical picture and make critical decisions about the future of that patient.

The students do not enter the houses, they are kept from the corridors or the balconies, with their face covered with a cloth mask, called nasobuco here, and their “knob” of water with chlorine solution on hand. Their work depends, above all, on the honesty of the residents, who are expected to tell the truth in order to avoid major infection problems, and that the wheel of the Cuban health system, which, although not perfect, does it is efficient, keeps going.

Ishaira has lived that experience in the first row and agreed to tell El Nuevo Día how she lived it.

Why did you decide to study medicine?

- When I was in high school I lost several people very close to me due to different illnesses. It was very difficult for me to feel that I had no knowledge of the human body or of medicine to help these people. As a result of these experiences, I decided that I wanted to obtain knowledge that would allow me to save many people's lives one day and since then I was convinced that I wanted to dedicate myself to medicine.

Why in Cuba?

- I decided to study medicine in Cuba because of the great focus that the Cuban system gives to health prevention and primary health. In Cuba, health is a right that is guaranteed to all citizens, and I personally wanted to train in such an environment. In addition, she was curious to learn how Cuba could do so much with all the limitations it had.

How was the experience? What has made it different?

- The experience has been very enriching. The most beautiful thing about studying at ELAM (Latin American School of Medicine) is sharing with students from all regions of the world. From the beginning we are exposed to different cultures, religions, languages which gives one a much broader vision of what is the concept of health and medicine in different countries. We learn about natural and traditional medicine, and how we can integrate that knowledge from our ancestors into our practice as doctors. And most importantly, we learn that health is a right that must be guaranteed to all people.

How are you dealing with the coronavirus personally? What was the hardest part?

- First of all as a medical student, I have taken the responsibility to learn about COVID-19 and how it has behaved since the outbreak began in China. Then educate myself on what steps I should take to protect myself and the people with whom I have contact. It is important to me to stay calm and prepare as much as possible, in case we have to take an even more active role in the fight against the virus.

The most difficult thing is being away from my family and being concerned about them. Most of my family was affected by the earthquakes in Guánica and had to leave the country and go to the United States, where there are obviously many cases and where access to health is not guaranteed.

What is your role as a medical student in this emergency? What work do they do?

- Our role has been to participate in the active research of people who have an acute respiratory symptoms or people who have recently come from abroad or have had contact with travelers. We go from house to house, working together with the family doctor and nurses from that community.

What do you ask people?

- Mainly we ask if there is any person who has come from abroad or if they have had a visit from someone who recently traveled. We also ask if there is anyone with acute respiratory symptoms. This information is collected and given to the family doctor, who

has the responsibility of carrying out epidemiological surveillance from the primary health care of those people that we identify. We are not in direct contact with people, we must keep an adequate space away and always use the nasobuco and hypochlorite solution to wash our hands. We also try to educate the population so that they have a perception of risk and know the appropriate measures that they must take to protect themselves.

How was the experience?

- This is not the first time we have investigated. On other occasions we have had to investigate when there are outbreaks of dengue. Cubans are generally very disciplined in terms of health, they already know the process very well and they know what our role is. But they are very different situations given the nature of this virus. For me, the most beautiful thing is when people thank you for the work we are doing, they give us the blessing and they ask us to take care of ourselves. For foreign students this research is voluntary, but in those moments you realize that our work is very important and that the population is aware of this and that no matter how many doors we have to knock, or how many times we have to shout, good morning, we do it because the country needs us and we do it with great pride.

Are you afraid of getting it? Do you feel safe?

- I think that, right now, given the situation in the world, the abnormal thing would be not to be afraid. Of course there is always a little fear, because when you knock on a door you don't know what you might find. But I try to focus on the things that I can control, which is to follow the security measures established by MINSAP and also by the WHO. I feel safe because I know that Cuba has faced much more difficult situations and have emerged victorious. As we say, Cubans do not play with their health and we are sure of that, because we live it every day.

What are the challenges of Cuban medicine against the coronavirus and in general?

- Definitely the greatest challenge facing Cuban medicine now and in general is the shortage of medicines and means of protection due to economic sanctions by the United States government. Sometimes the drugs are 'lost', as Cubans say, and it greatly complicates the treatment patients carry. But its best resource is prevention measures and the commitment of health professionals. They have shown that with very little you can do a lot and we trust that this time it will be the same.

What has been the experience of being a medical student in Cuba?

- It is a beautiful sense of belonging to a project much bigger than myself. The ELAM project was a dream come true for Commander Fidel, to extend the solidarity of the Cuban people with young people from different countries of the world, and I have been blessed with this opportunity. I have a lot to thank the Cuban people for realizing my dream of becoming a doctor and being able to return to Puerto Rico debt free, so that I can implement the type of community medicine that we have been taught here.

Did you make the right decision by coming here? Why?

- I have had very difficult moments since arriving in Cuba. From here I had to live through Hurricane Maria and not have any contact with my family for two weeks. I have had to experience the death of several relatives and more recently the earthquakes that my people in Guánica and the entire southern area experienced. Despite that, I have always been convinced that I made the right decision. I cling to what Commander Fidel Castro said in his concept of Revolution: "defend the values that you believe in at the price of any sacrifice." I've made a lot of sacrifices to be here, but I am convinced that it is here where I'll become a more humane, supportive doctor, ready to face the difficult health situations that Puerto Rico is experiencing.

Anything that Puerto Rico can learn from the Cuban experience?

- Regarding facing the coronavirus, the key is to carry out the tests, isolate the suspicious people and identify the contacts of those people. Here it is much easier, because there is

a public health system that is very well organized in the different communities. We must fight to rescue our health system, in order to face these types of situations that unfortunately will be more common every day.

Ishaira knows and recognizes that the Cuban health system is not perfect, that it lacks resources, that it has no luxuries or excesses. But she defends the idea that Puerto Rico accepts some of the positive things that Cuba understands.

"I would like Puerto Rico to know that there are people here in solidarity with Puerto Rico. That people are happy when I say that I am Puerto Rican and that they know a lot about the historical ties that unite us as sister nations. Cuba has remained faithful in defense of the claims of the Puerto Rican people and it is time for us to begin to know a little more about the current Cuban reality and to fight together to face the difficulties that we will have to live as Caribbean islands in this era of climate change. We have a lot to learn ", she concluded.