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"Motivation and Personal Success: The Mentors Speak" featuring Dr. Alfredo Quinones-Hinojosa

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Motivation and Personal Success: The Mentors Speak

Dr. Alfredo Quinones-Hinojosa, MD

"From Farmworker to Neurosurgeon"

Host: Armando F Sanchez

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Dr. Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, M.D. was an undocumented immigrant from Mexicali, Mexico, who was working the vegetable fields of the Central Valley in California. He "jumped the fence" in 1987 at age 19.

Today, Dr. Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, M.D., is at the John Hopkins School of Medicine and has four positions. He is a neurosurgeon who teaches oncology and neurosurgery, directs a neurosurgery clinic, and heads a laboratory studying brain tumors.

There are only 670 neurosurgeons in the US. That is one neurosurgeon for every 468,000 persons in the US. He attended the University of California Berkeley and Harvard Medical.

He wrote the book "Becoming Dr. Q: My Journey From Migrant Farm Worker To Brain Surgeon."

Interview:

Sanchez: Gentlemen, thank you for being with us today on Latino Role Models and Success.

This show highlights global individuals making significant headway in their fields, which teaches us that anything is possible. They give us a new perspective on life, give us hope, and, more importantly, let us know there is all this need. There is a need in the health field for some, even the engineering and the sciences, in all areas. Today, this is a perfect story that we want to learn from Dr. Quinonez. On Facebook, Jonas, you know, there is just so much to learn from you about our own

lives, what we can do with the potential of our lives, and more importantly, what our future kids can do in our communities to reach levels to be as helpful as Dr. Federico. Let me briefly read some very small segments of his probably 30 Page bio. To give you a glance at it, Dr. Quinonez was from a Mexicali, Mexico, and he worked in the vegetable fields of Central Valley in California. He came to the United States at age 19. Today, he is that the John Hopkins School of Medicine, which is in Baltimore, Maryland, has four physicians. I don't know how the man sleeps. He is a neurosurgeon, a teacher in oncology in neurosurgery in a red-state neurosurgery clinic, and hit the laboratory, studying brain tumors. And he attended the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard Medical.

And on top of that, he's an author, and he has time to talk to us in the media. He wrote the book "Becoming Dr. Q." Starting as an immigrant farmworker to becoming a brain surgeon. Doctor, thank you for coming to the show this morning. I am delighted to be with you and our audience. What a great honor and a pleasure for me, and your words humble me. You tell people that you are just a simple, efficient surgeon and scientist, and my role is to serve your patients and the world in any way possible. Well, you do that, and you're also a role model. This is where we're going to go with the story today. But let us begin to look at your life and what triggered you to make confident decisions. Where were you raised, and what was it like to live in Mexicali, Mexico. First, people don't know how nice and cool it is during the summer there.

Dr. Quinonez: People still questioned where I was born and raised, and you're right, Mexicali, Mexico. You know when people I have patients from all over the world, and many patients from the Middle East say that it is extremely hot. I always tell them that I grew up in this little part of the United States and that when you look at the map, you know you have all those maps with the different colors as to how hot it is here and how hot it is there. There's a little red dot right in between Calexico Mexicali that is always red, and it's about 150- and 220-degrees Fahrenheit, which is extremely hot, and that's exactly what I grew up in. I always call that area my little haven. I mean, I looked back at my life; Amanda and I had such that it was challenging in some ways, poverty, and hunger. But at the end of the day, I was surrounded by an incredible family, my parents, who serve as my role models, and my grandparents, who had no education. My parents worked all

their lives so that one day I could fulfill this dream of becoming something, of doing something with my life with my hands and this beautiful brain that God blessed me with. And that's precisely what happened. Even though I grew up in a very poor part of the country, I remember growing up and wondering if I would be able to navigate the beautiful stars one day. I used to look at the sky and see the stars.

How little did I know that one day I was going to be surrounded by stars and the people that surround me nowadays? But I was going to be studying stars and the stars in the human brain. You know, I learned about these little cells that are called astrocytes. Astrocyte is an old Latin word for stars. And that's what I do; I study astrocytes themselves in the human brain. When I was a little boy, how little did I know that I would end up here today doing brain surgeries and being a scientist. It is a dream come true, and I cannot remember; I cannot take credit for it; it is a testament to my family and friends. I have people like us that have supported me and believed in me. It's also a testament that a country like the United States can build a beautiful country that opens the doors for many people like myself, immigrants who want to live that dream for themselves and our future generations.

Sanchez: What happened to you that triggered the science for you as a young man? Because like you said, you know, you're not coming from the family of the authorities and doctors. So when did the science bug hit you? When you were a kid?

Dr. Quinonez: I would say that we're all born with that science bug. We all explored our artists; we're all explorers. If you look at our children, you know if you look at our one, two years old kids, children. It doesn't matter what religion, how we are raised, or our skin color; we all explore things, grab things, and taste things. You know, we all try to talk, we all spend our whole infancy trying to say something, and we are encouraged to do so. It's quite interesting because as we get older, we are now being told not to speak, we are being told to be quiet and not to explore, but I think that many of us are born, I would say that every single one of us is born with that exploratory gene, you know, and somehow we got to figure out the way to encourage that ability to explore, you know, and in my case, I would say that my parents did a beautiful job and never, never took anything for

granted. Even though we had very little, they always encouraged my siblings and me to go out there and explore the world. So I would say that we're all born with that gene. And I was somehow, by the time I came to the United States. I was at the University of California Berkeley. I began to realize that there are formal ways to, you know, to strengthen that, you know, the piety that is within us to explore the world through the laboratories through scientific work, and that's more or less how I began to shape my life into becoming a brain surgeon in a science which is what I do today in both of these things are intimately related. Because remember, I do science on brain cancer, which is precisely what I do in the operating room. I do surgery for brain tumors. Our goals, our mutual goals, for our future generation, are going to try to make sure that our youth, our future generations, get encouraged to pursue science because, as you know, science is absolutely beautiful. I get to do incredible things. I get to touch the human brain every day, and that is, to me, the most beautiful thing that a human being can do. And is given the privilege to do.

Sanchez: It sounds to me like you did not choose the medical field. They chose you.

Dr. Quinonez: Sometimes I wonder, I really do like, you know, you put it beautifully. People ask me, How do you end up choosing neurosurgery and I say well, I would say that sometimes I like to think that I selected neurosurgery. Still, the reality is that what I decided is my dedication to pursuing an education I did. I consciously knew that education was the best provision for old age. And I knew that education would pay off, and I knew that it would be years of investment that I did. You see, I made a conscious choice. But the reality is everything else came as I was exploring the world as I was in medical school, going through the hospitals at Harvard; one day, I stumbled upon seeing the human brain pulsate, and that captivated me, and I fell in love as I always tell my wife. It was my second love, and investment is just happy. What happens? I mean that you explore, and things come to you. So, you're right. Did I choose neurosurgery, or did neurosurgery pick me? I think that that's a question for future debate. But one thing I always tell people, you know, pursue your dreams. Sometimes your goals are straightforward. My dream was, you know, as I look and continue to be, to help people. That's it. I

mean, it's always been that simple. I continue to pursue that dream, and I will; as I get more extensive and more available resources, I can do more things for people.

Sanchez: Absolutely. Two questions; Did you learn anything that is helping you today, having worked out in the vegetable fields when you were a young boy? And secondly, did you struggle with the language since you came to the United States at a much older age?

Dr. Quinonez: No question about it. I'm going to take the second question. First is the language. I would say that the language is an essential skill that I continue to work on every day. This is why I write so ferociously. This is why I read so ferociously every single day. I have an appetite for becoming a better speaker, writer, and communicator. So yes, I did struggle, and I tell the story that when I was a medical student at Harvard during my second year in medical school, I used to take my notes in Spanish. And it was not until I was in my third year of medical school that I had my first dream in English. As I now map the brain for language, I understand that once you begin to think in another language subconsciously. I, for instance, dream that's really when you start to assimilate that language, and that was rather late. Think about it. I was a third-year medical student and arguably in one of the country's best medical students' schools. Now, what I learned, and I'm going to tie that to the second the first question that you asked me, which is, did I know something about the field that allows me to be successful? There's no question about it.

I have got to tell you that my time as a migrant farmworker has to be one of the most beautiful times I have had. I'm sure it was hard. People ask me, was it hard working in the fields? Yes, it was hard, but it's also why I gained so much sense that allowed me to succeed at UC Berkeley. There was harvest, and I learned simple little things when working in the fields that sometimes are the simplest things in life, like picking fruit, tomatoes, broccoli, or cauliflower. Simple things like that. That makes us who we are; that makes us human. And allow me to appreciate the value of loving each other or being respectful towards people. That simple skill has allowed me to succeed in what I do every day. It has allowed me to have a great practice as a Brain Surgeon and an incredible laboratory and has allowed me to excel as a scientist, a physician, and surgeon here at Johns Hopkins

by being promoted to the highest levels as a full professor within a short amount of time. But those were the skills, you know, working in the field as a migrant farmworker back then in California taught me so many lessons about the power of being respectful in loving one another. Now, to give more insight for persons who have never done this, you're talking about working out in a field where people are hunched down all day long, working in the sun, no sun cover, you know, like you said sometimes working in 110, 120 degrees, starting work at four in the morning and stop working at 11 o'clock because it's just getting too hot. And in the middle of all this, you're working, and you're learning lessons about life. That's exactly right. You know, and I talked about it in my book, I remember my life lessons; I mean, some of those lessons are what not to do. All right. I mean, that's the reality. I look back and see how the people who put food on our tables get treated with so little respect. So little support, no health insurance, no access to water, sometimes no access to bathrooms, sometimes no access to showers. I talk in my book about how people who were privileged by being born into wealth would come in and walk among us and treat us as if we were invisible. As if we did not exist. And that is a powerful lesson to realize that I did not want to be that person. I wanted to be someone with whom I wanted to acknowledge their presence when I walked around or among people. And that's precisely what I do here at Hopkins when I come in late at night or leave, you know, late at night, and I see janitors cleaning the floors or coming over and picking up the garbage? I see myself, and I say hi to them when I care for my patients. I see myself. I see my family in some people have, and some do not have, but at the end of the day, we're all in the same boat, trying to make this world a better place. We all have the same beautiful brains. We all are endowed with the same abilities. Some of us just happen to take better advantage of our resources than others. I acknowledged that those are the lessons that I learned in the field that I look back, and if I hadn't worked in the fields, I don't think I would be who I am today.

The idea of working in the fields is to say it's to be acknowledged, especially a person should still do it and travel every day and migrate across the United States. I was recently in a meeting in Los Angeles, talking about migrant workers who said This is Los Angeles downtown LA. They say, " Oh yeah, we have farms here in Los Angeles." I said yeah, and I started to think about it, down the street. There's a strawberry farm, and then there's a corn farm. I didn't even realize that we're in an

urban area with so many farms in the city. Yeah, I mean, you feel it's part of our life. I mean, agriculture is part of our life, is part of our country, is what puts food on our table. There are migrant farmworkers or migrant workers who go beyond work in agriculture.

Remember, after I worked in agriculture, I went on to work at a railroad, first cleaning tanks and learning how to weld and paint and doing much stuff as a migrant Worker. I was no longer a migrant farmworker, but I was still a migrant worker moving from place to place, you know, and there are so many lessons that we need to make sure that we take with ourselves as we move, as we try to move this country forward. That it is indeed the American Dream has been built on the backs of many immigrants. If you look at the report from President Obama or the US News and World Report or Forbes magazine, a significant percentage of new companies being built in the United States, RV and start startup companies from people who immigrated either first- or second-generation immigrants, because people like ourselves can take risks and have the ability to keep building this beautiful country. And we need to take those lessons. We need to make sure that we acknowledge the power that immigrants bring to this beautiful nation. What's your advice to teachers from kindergarten to 12th grade about stimulating children to love the sciences?

My advice has been to show them how beautiful sciences are; we do a beautiful job of telling our children every day through the media how excellent movie stars are, how beautiful singers are, and so on. And we do such a poor job of letting people know that scientists and teachers and architects and lawyers and doctors and all the people who have built this country are also beautiful people who do beautiful things for our country. We need to make sure of that. My advice has always been to our teachers to make sure that when they are in class, invite someone like me to their classroom, and they don't have to be by someone like me in their communities. If asked to come to a lecture or say what they do daily, some people are professionals, whom I'm sure would get them highly excited, get the children excited, or teach them the power of science. I think science is better learned by action than by contemplation or lectures. Take them to the small laboratory in their classroom and have them explore the scientific method and make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. This allows them to put their hands on the

mammalian brain, necessarily the human brain! They can do so many things and dissect, you know, from insects to rodents. Let them feel that excitement and let the discovery pump through the veins in their arteries as they feel the exhilaration that comes when they discover something new and unacknowledged. That's what I tell our teachers. Many of our teachers do a beautiful job. That's something that breaks my heart. Sometimes we do not recognize a beautiful job held by many of our teachers, and we don't give them the appropriate support. We continue to cut budgets in our schools and all these kinds of stuff. That is true, in my opinion, a mistake. Because remember, one of the reasons this country moves so quickly, unlike much of the rest of the world, is because we took the time to educate the middle class. And if we don't do that, we will suffer immensely. And we need to bring our lower classes up to the middle classes. They're not happy with that in our country, or lower classes are in our Hispanic and African American communities. We need to do a better job educating our masses to keep this country moving forward and continue to be innovative and creative.

Sanchez: Unfortunately, I am aware of some high schools that teach sciences but never do a lab because they said there's no lab, so you know, you bring up a critical issue all the way around. To go back quickly. You are educated, Nicole and me in making California and when you go there? Do you remember anything special going on with your teachers there that stood out in your mind about the world of the sciences?

Dr. Quinonez: Well, no question. I mean, I remember when people asked me in the past what made a lasting impression in my mind about my teachers. I remember my first and second-grade teachers early on in my life. We sometimes tend to forget that those are the formative years we are at those stages in development. We are like stem cells. We're getting ready to differentiate into something that will have a lasting impression or future. I remember my kindergarten, my first and second-grade teachers, how incredibly creative they would be with the little resources, how they would take us outside of the school and go around and dig in the ground and find little worms, bring them in so we could study the way they move. We would see little butterflies, look at the colors, and imagine how they became butterflies. And without really knowing it and with the little resources they had, we were using the scientific method. We were

exploring the world in learning by directly interacting with nature, really, and sometimes we think that we need to prepare lectures and that we need to do all this kind of stuff when in reality, it isn't the simple things that we take a long-lasting impression, and we carry it with us. And in my mind, those teachers were incredibly creative, and they stimulated my brain. And I'm sure they form connections in my brain that I feel somehow have shaped the way I think about the world for the rest of my life. Those years are critical, and somehow, we have to make it fun for our children. Science is fun, no doubt about it. I love stories where I did some experiments, and I wonder if I didn't kill myself when I was a kid, but I love what I was doing. I found out that it blows up if you put gasoline inside a Coca-Cola bottle and light it up! You know, children, things that we did.

Sanchez: We all know, I know—some things we did as kids. I don't even want to go there! You're already dedicated to so many things, and you're also a husband, and you save your time by preventing brain cancer. And is that preventable?

Dr. Quinonez: Much work. Over the last few years, I realized that I'd been given a voice, and I want to make sure that I am heard. I try to. One of the things that I tell people is how do you become a better father, a better friend, a better husband? I don't have a recipe, but I learned that I am very passionate about what I do as a brain surgeon, and I want to make sure that the world knows that brain tumors are curable.

Many of them and some of them are not. In the ones that are not curable, we need to invest in science and discoveries. But I also realized that as a person who has lived two lives, one of extreme poverty and now one of intense richness, I'm not talking about monetary richness. I'm not talking about richness because people trust me with their life. And that is an incredible gift that my parents and their families have given me. I try to be someone who's lived those two lives. I tried to combine my present life with my past life by going back and giving back a little bit; I go back to the communities. I organize many talks; I bring inner-city kids to Hopkins to teach them a little more about what we're doing. And as we said, try to get them to learn by action more than just contemplation.

And then I go around the world. I've been doing some missions with some of my colleagues in countries like Mexico in critical areas. We do some of the most incredibly complex brain tumor cases that you can imagine. We try to go out there and learn from my colleagues in Mexico, to teach them what we do, and at the same time, I have brought my daughter, my oldest daughter, so she can learn the value of giving back instead of me telling her. I use that to bond with my children and teach them the power of having a responsible consciousness, so they give gifts to the world because some of us have been blessed in so many ways. I do all these things because, at the end of the day, I remember the basic principle of my life is to enjoy life and try to help people, and when you keep this simple principle, my life is so beautiful. And I'm not saying that my whole life is beautiful. Of course, I go through difficult times sometimes, especially when I must fight this brain cancer and my patients die, but I see the beauty in all of that. I see the beauty of the legacy that many of my patients leave behind by allowing us to try to find a cure. We're fighting back, and I can see our work to fight back rather than just accept that as part of life and then put our hands up. Or that's too bad. We are persons like you, studying it.

Sanchez: We all benefit, from around the world, because of it.
As we're getting close to the show's end, I would like to give you time for closing statements. I want to highlight that they can find you in your book *Becoming Dr. Q*. My journey from migrant farm worker to a brain surgeon. Look it up, ladies and gentlemen. I looked it up everywhere, and they just popped up everywhere. So please don't hesitate to find the book.

Also… In closing statements, where can people find out if they want to be part of the brain tumors prevention programs and the different programs you're putting out there?

Dr. Quinonez: Well, I will say that first, thank you very much for mentioning my book. I've been very blessed is last year. I received an award in New York City for the best Latino Book Award, and the summer has been released in Spanish as well. I'm going to be with Damien Bichir here, an actor nominated for an Academy Award two years ago for making that movie about a migrant worker in Los Angeles, A Better Life. We're going to be releasing my book in

Spanish. Significant events in Monterrey next week, and for that, I'm very blessed to be in Spanish. I was in many talks about potentially making a movie, and it, to me, is humbling, but the reality is I never thought of my life. All the options that I have had have been worthwhile making a movie. Still, I put a lot of that information on my webpage @DoctorQMd and DRQMD/. A lot of this information about the work we do or the possibilities of learning more about brain tumors is available there, and I encourage people to search. I encourage your audience always to keep dreaming. Never, never stop dreaming.
Sanchez: Ladies and gentlemen, not only does it work in the brain, but he also uses it and inspires us to dream. I love a policy statement. I love the comment. I never thought about it that way until you mentioned that we should go inside our brains and understand that there's a universe inside us. And all this. Things are interacting, and all these points are, and keep learning. And Scientist, I hope to hear that from all of you; keep learning because you guys are changing the world in the blink of an eye. I want to thank you, Dr. Quinonez. Please, your closing statements. You said many beautiful things, but I just want to extract one more from you.

Dr. Quinonez: Well, thank you very much. Remember that science is fun. Science is wonderful. And if we work together, we can achieve great things through determination, resilience, excitement for life, and admiration for one another. And always remember to mentor someone either under you or above you. You will need mentorship, and I welcome that as well—every single day.

Sanchez: I must let you go, Doctor. I know you're a very busy, busy man. But thank you for giving us your time on this program. We've been talking to Dr. Quinonez. Thank you for giving of your time, and thank you also to Colleen for helping us to put the show for Dr. Quinonez together, which is significant. We wish you continued success, and I look forward to highlighting you in future programs. Thank you.