Congratulations to our Star of the Month for February 2022, Carolina Lopez-Silva from the School of Medicine! As part of this year’s SOURCE Service Scholars cohort, Carolina is currently working with our partners at CASA to support immigrant youth here in Baltimore! We spoke with her about her experience in the SSS program and how else she is serving our Baltimore community. Read more below!

Tell us a little bit about yourself. What degree program are you enrolled in? What brought you to Hopkins and Medicine?

Hi! My name is Carolina Lopez-Silva, I was born and raised in Bogota, Colombia and I am currently a second-year medical student. I decided to pursue medicine for a multitude of reasons; I wanted to have a career where I would be able to use (and help discover!) scientific knowledge to promote health and treat disease, while also being in a position to advocate for the wellbeing of underrepresented communities. More specifically, I came to Hopkins is because I wanted to attend a medical school where I would have the opportunity to learn from those who are the forefront of medicine and public health. I knew Hopkins would give me these opportunities and I'm really happy to be here.

What made you want to get involved with CASA Maryland and the SOURCE Service Scholars program? Can you tell us a little bit about the work you are doing?

After moving to the U.S., I began to learn more about health disparities affecting immigrant and Latino communities. During my undergraduate years, I volunteered as a medical interpreter; in my work with immigrant families and uninsured patients, I observed the unmet need for providers who could overcome the cultural and linguistic barriers that keep these patients from obtaining medical care. This work and my own experiences as an immigrant have shaped my goals and career aspirations. This is why when I learned about the SSS program, I was very excited at the prospect of working with CASA, one of the largest immigrant advocacy organizations in the Mid-Atlantic.

Currently, I am serving as a Volunteer Coordinator and Outreach Specialist for Mi Espacio, one of CASA’s youth programs. The goal of Mi Espacio is to support immigrant youth through after-school programs focused on academic success and leadership development. I am responsible for recruiting, training and onboarding volunteer tutors for Mi Espacio homework help sessions. I also serve as a tutor during these homework help sessions, and it’s been really fun connecting with students virtually. We are also planning on holding workshop sessions in collaboration with JHU student groups, so Mi Espacio participants have the opportunity to meet and learn from a variety of different organizations.

What has your experience been like connecting with community members during the pandemic? Can you tell us about other service opportunities you have participated in?

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The pandemic has definitely impacted us by limiting our ability to hold in-person events. However, I think the pandemic has also taught us how to adapt and take advantage of technology to continue serving communities. At Mi Espacio, with the help of Zoom, we’ve been able to connect with students virtually who would otherwise not be able to attend our sessions because of lack of transportation or similar barriers.

I’ve been fortunate to have several opportunities to engage in community service during my first two years at Hopkins. Before I joined the SSS program, I served as a JHU Heat Corps volunteer, where I was responsible for delivering workshops about COVID-19 to high school and middle school students. I also volunteered at the JHU community clinic in Sacred Heart Church, where I assisted in COVID-19 relief efforts, including testing and vaccination. Finally, I have worked with Centro Sol, another great community organization, on a variety of projects to serve the East Baltimore community, such as creating a Spanish video tutorial for MyChart enrollment, leading a ‘La Hora del Cafe’ workshop on COVID-19 testing, and most recently, screening patients at an Embajadores de Salud event.

What other service activities do you have planned in the future? Are there any activities where others can get involved?

We are always looking for more Mi Espacio tutors! As I mentioned earlier, we are also looking to collaborate with student organizations to hold special programing for Mi Espacio. For example, we currently have an awesome collaboration with the Latino Medical Student Association: The ‘Healthy Life for a Bright Future’ workshop series. Here, I would like to highlight the incredible work done by my classmates, Razeen Karim and Gabrielle Milner, and many other LMSA members and medical students who made this project a reality. If you would like to get involved with any of these initiatives, or if you are part of a student group looking to connect virtually with high school students, please reach out to me through SOURCE or the JHU directory! 😊

How does your community work complement what you’re learning in the classroom at the School of Medicine?

I believe that engaging in community service is incredibly important as a medical student. At the end of the day, medicine is about people. Even with all of the scientific and clinical knowledge we gain in school, if we don’t understand the economic, social, racial, political, and linguistic barriers that our patients face daily, we won’t be prepared to help them. We need to get out of the classroom and meet those communities that we hope to serve.

What advice would you give to other students looking to engage in service-learning?

First of all, I would say: yay! It’s awesome you are looking to engage in service-learning. Without a doubt, the resources provided by SOURCE are a great place to start. Subscribe to the SOURCE Weekly Service Scoop and follow them on social media. Also, keep an eye out for emails from faculty and students. Student organizations are often looking for volunteers for a wide arrange of one-time and longitudinal opportunities. Finally, I would encourage you to attend seminars and talks on topics that you find interesting. You never know who you may meet and what opportunities may arise.

Thank you for all of your tremendous service to our Baltimore community!