

# Building Relationships and Changing Lives

## A Community Health Worker Story

***Maria Murphy, AS; Sergio Matos, BS***

**Abstract:** Maria Murphy is a community health worker in the south Bronx, an impoverished underprivileged neighborhood of largely Latino and African American communities along with smaller ethnic minority groups. Having come to New York at 13 years of age from her native Puerto Rico, Maria held numerous jobs while supporting her family and completing her education. Maria soon got a position as a community health worker and discovered purpose in her work. Her work with people she serves has been called a labor of love by her clients. Maria describes it as her passion. This is her story. **Key words:** *community health worker (CHW), diabetes, empowerment*

**A**FTER working with community health worker Maria Murphy to secure a state ID for her Medicaid application, one client's nephew came to the hospital demanding that Maria be given a raise, saying that Maria had saved his aunt's life. For another patient, Maria's community ties, knowledge, and commitment provided entry to a complicated health care system, and a valuable friendship. "I am very happy since Maria has been coming to my house" this patient said, "We talk about different things--how I eat, how to cook better. Sometimes we go out and do other things. I love her!"

"What we do is amazing" Maria says about her profession as a community health worker

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*The authors have disclosed that they have no significant relationships with, or financial interest in, any commercial companies pertaining to this article.*

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DOI: 10.1097/JAC.0b013e31822c9181

(CHW) in the Family Medicine Department of Bronx Lebanon Hospital Center in New York City, "Not everyone can do this work but if you can, you are blessed. If you run a hospital and if you care about the people who come in here, then how could you not offer this CHW service?"

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Maria came to the United States at the age of 13 years with her parents and 9 siblings and settled in New York City. Leaving friends and family for the promise of a new land, Maria embraced possibilities as she struggled with a language and culture she did not know or understand—struggles that strengthened her character and contributed to the determined, accomplished, and beloved CHW she would become. Looking for an internship to complete her education, Maria happened upon a posting for a CHW position.

"I didn't really think I would get the job but I figured even if I could volunteer and learn it would be great." Completely to her surprise, she was offered the job as a CHW "I'm a CHW here and I love it" Maria reports, "I work in diabetes but we do more than diabetes, that's for sure. We wear a lot of hats. Really! To do this you really have to be passionate and you really

have to have empathy. You have to want to understand people. You have to be driven to make a difference. I mean, you can't change the whole world but if you can make a difference in one person's life, imagine how many others that person can touch—even in their own families. So you start a chain reaction and that's amazing! To know you can help people become empowered is wonderful.”

Patient after patient validate Maria's work in her community and her decision to be-

come a community health worker. “Since I met Maria I have more confidence and knowledge about my condition” says a third patient, “She shows me that she cares. She's interested. She asks me a lot of questions but I like that she does not tell me what to do. She's like my mother and I respect everything she says.”

Maria's eyes sparkle. “I have found meaning in this work. I am proud of the work I do,” she says.