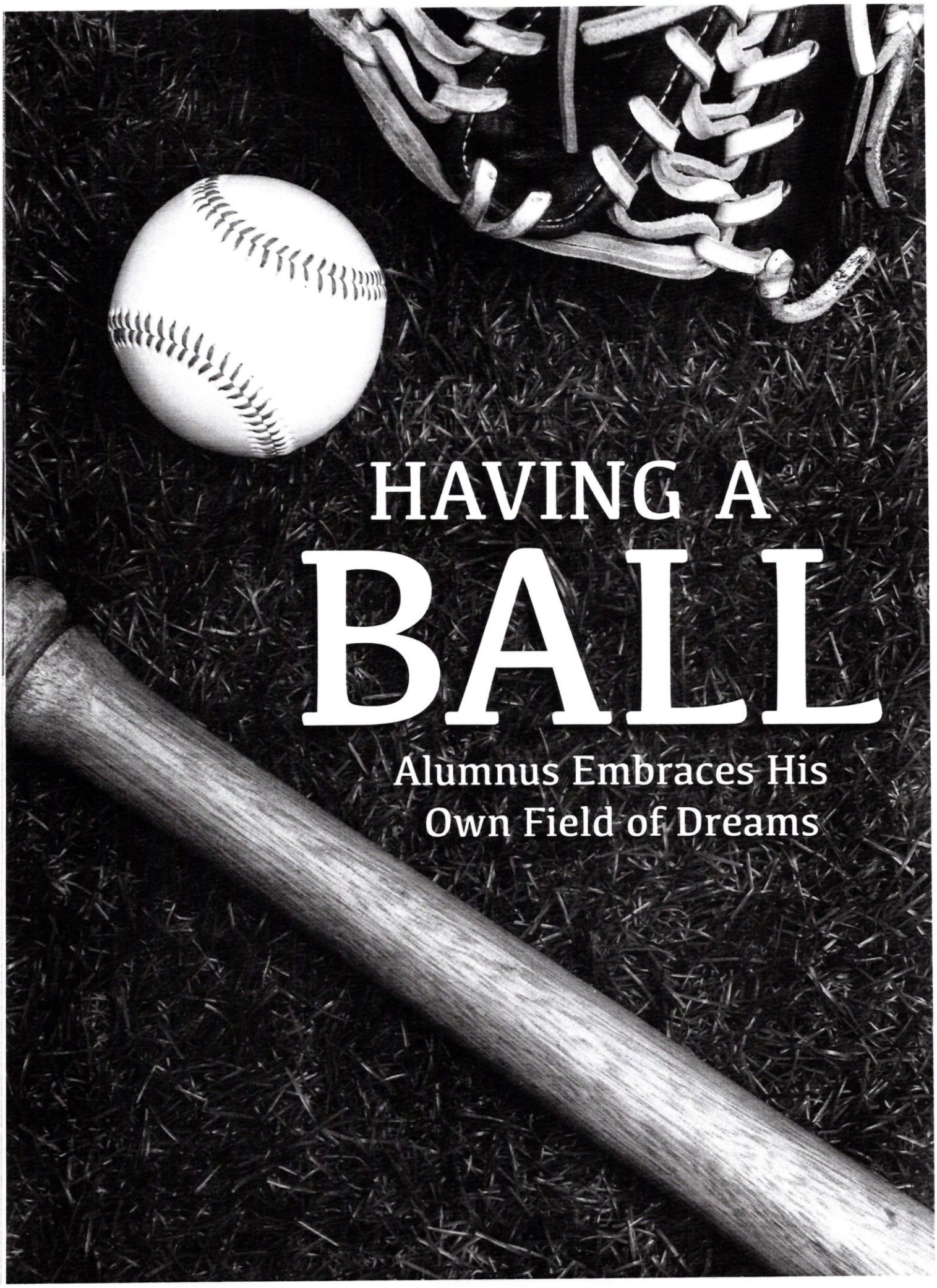


HAVING A BALL

Alumnus Embraces His Own Field of Dreams



When Dr. Jose Navarro began sixth grade in Davie, Florida, he remembers being asked his name on the first day of class.

"I answered, 'Eleven.'"

Navarro, who received the DCG's 2023 Outstanding Young Alumnus Award, laughs lightly at the memory, recalling the culture shock and communications challenges of his move to the United States from Managua, Nicaragua in 1997 at age 11.

"I couldn't speak English, so I spent the year answering a lot of questions with the word, 'Maybe,'" he says with a chuckle.

English wasn't his only challenge. Navarro arrived in Florida with his two older siblings to join their father, Evert, who had recently immigrated. But his mother, Marcia, had to stay behind, beginning what would prove to be a years-long wait for the visa she needed to reunite with her family. Navarro desperately missed his mom, and his father worked long hours at multiple jobs to support the family. Navarro also missed baseball, his favorite pastime in his home country. The pickup games he was accustomed to back home were hard to come by in his new neighborhood.

Still, he considers his first year in the United States one of the best of his life. "I was just wowed by this country," he says. "The Fort Lauderdale area was a melting pot, so I met kids from all over the world. I felt so fortunate to be here."

He also reclaimed his love of baseball once he began high school. "My brother introduced me to the coaches, and they encouraged me to try out," Navarro says. "It was tough; I'm a shorty, and here I was, a 14-year-old who hadn't played in three years, suddenly competing with 18-year-olds who weighed 180 pounds. But I was just happy to be playing. I may not be best, but I won't give up."

His Nova High School team went on to win the 2004 Florida State Championship at Steinbrenner Field in Tampa, Florida.

Baseball not only bolstered Navarro's self-esteem, it also made him finally feel at home in the United States. "When we moved to Florida, my family kind of lived in a bubble," he explains. "We watched Hispanic television, ate Hispanic food, listened to Hispanic music. . . I didn't feel fully integrated until my baseball coach took me under his wing and urged me to fully be a part of my new world. I think it was very good for my development."

That coach, Patrick McQuaid and his wife, Laurie, opened their home to Navarro as well, including him in meals and activities, as did other mentors he encountered throughout his adolescence. "My parents were very supportive, but they didn't really know how to help me when it came to things like how to sign up for the SAT," Navarro says. "The McQuaids and other good friends, like the Richards family, took me under their wing. They made sure I stayed out of trouble and kept focused on my goals."

Yet his parents were more inspirational than they could have known. They imparted their strong values, including their work ethic — even, in his mother's case, from a distance. They inspired Navarro's career choice as well.

"My grandfather was a dentist, and my mom worked in his office in Managua," Navarro says. "The front of their house was the clinic, so work was just an everyday part of life. Baseball also reinforced the message that hard work is its own reward."

Navarro, whose boundless optimism tends to be infectious, found more doors opening after graduating from high school. He earned a baseball scholarship to LaGrange College in LaGrange, Georgia, becoming a U.S. citizen in 2006 as he earned his undergraduate degree in biochemistry. But even while excelling in the classroom and on the baseball field, he pined for a goal that seemed increasingly elusive: a visa for his mother, who by this point had been separated from her family for almost a decade.

"I went to the dean (Dr. Linda R. Buchanan), who called the president (Dr. Frank Stewart Gulley, president of LaGrange University from 1996-2009) and told him about the situation," says Navarro. "My mother missed my high school graduation, and I told Dr. Gulley, 'I'd really like her to see me graduate from college.' He put me on the phone with someone he thought might be able to help, and I found myself talking to the governor (Sonny Perdue, governor of Georgia from 2003-11). He said, 'We're very proud of you and we need more people like you in this country.' I never forgot that."

Navarro's mom didn't quite make it in time for his graduation, but she obtained a visa soon afterward and has been with her family on U.S. soil ever since.

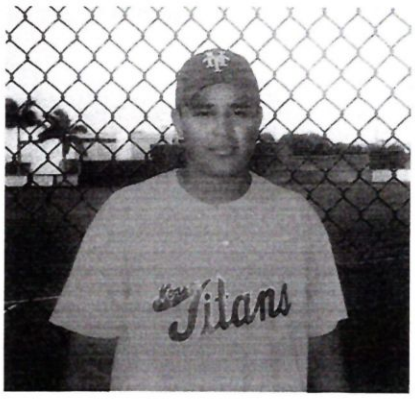
Just as Navarro's coaches had mentored him in high school, his baseball coaches in college helped him advance his goals, for instance by introducing them to a LaGrange dentist, Dr. Christopher Harman ('96), when Navarro expressed an interest in medicine or dentistry. Navarro shadowed Harman while earning his degree.

"He's a super nice guy and very knowledgeable," Navarro says.

While observing the dentist's skills, Navarro shared his goals with his newest mentor: serving others and having a significant impact on their lives, yet prioritizing family time as well. Harman told him dentistry was a natural fit, and that his alma mater — The Dental College of Georgia — was one of the best schools in the nation.

Navarro visited the school, "and I truly saw myself there," he says.

He was accepted for admission and began the next leg of his journey as one of three Hispanics in his class.







Navarro relished the experience. "I tell people, 'I'd go back to dental school in a heartbeat,'" he says. "I formed so many good relationships and had such amazing training."

He planned to pursue general dentistry and begin a career as soon as he earned his degree. But he changed his mind after a rotation with Dr. Roy Rockman, a now-retired assistant professor in the Department of Pediatric Dentistry. "Dr. Rockman loves baseball, so that was our first connection," Navarro says. "As we got to know each other, he told me, 'Kids are gonna love you,' but I told him I had zero interest in working with children. I just thought it would be too difficult, treating patients who were miserable to be in a dental chair. Dr. Rockman said, 'Okay, we're gonna work on that.'"

Rockman knew Navarro's sunny personality would win children over, and Navarro had the grades to pursue whichever specialty he desired.

Pediatric dentistry it was.

"Dr. Rockman and so many other faculty members, including Dr. Carole Hanes, were just wonderful," Navarro says. "I can't speak highly enough about the dental school and the people who inspired me."

The feeling was mutual.

After earning his dental degree in 2012, he worked briefly as a general dentist in Warner Robins, Georgia, then applied for a pediatric dentistry residency at Lutheran Medical Center in New York, now called NYU Langone. Navarro recalls, "The director of the residency, Dr. Julie Cernigliaro, said, 'I have never had this many phone calls for a candidate. Your school has been calling nonstop.'"

Navarro completed the residency, falling in love with orthodontics along the way. He practiced pediatric dentistry in Queens, New York, before expanding his expertise by completing an orthodontics and dento-facial orthopedics residency at NYU Hospitals Center. He graduated first in his class and received the Theodore L. Jerrold Award for outstanding achievement. "I loved my ortho residency with Dr. Laurance Jerrold," he says.

Navarro now was ready to begin his career in earnest. He and wife Kelly moved to Lutz, Florida, where he opened Navarro Orthodontics, which now has two locations in the area. "My specialties have given me a better understanding of growth and development," he says, enabling him to treat complex cases requiring surgical intervention, growth modification with orthopedics and craniofacial anomalies in conjunction with craniofacial teams.

He laughs now at his former trepidation at the thought of treating children. "I really enjoy it," Navarro says. "There's a lot of psychology involved, particularly since you're serving both the children and their parents, who can bring in their own phobias and fears. I incorporate a lot of different techniques, including distraction. I pride myself on giving injections without the child knowing they got a shot."

The quick reflexes he learned on the ball field serve him well in dentistry as well. "You have to be fast with kids," he says. "They'll stick with you for maybe 10 minutes, 15 tops."

He adds with a laugh, "Pediatric dentists are guaranteed a spot in heaven for sure."

Navarro also values the potentially life-changing implications of the field. "In pediatric dentistry, you can actually save a child's life, for instance by treating abscesses," he says. "You don't get to say that in orthodontics, which I now practice exclusively, but that's the area where I'm able to help children improve their self-esteem. I love being a part of that change, and I'm happy I've had both sets of experiences."

And Navarro has never forgotten his roots.

In addition to his U.S. offices, "I opened a clinic in Nicaragua," he says. "I wanted to bring something different to the public down there — to introduce the kind of hygiene standards, treatment and work efficiency people are accustomed to in the United States. I have a team of six dentists there, and we offer a lot of free service, as well as multidisciplinary care."

Coming full circle, he also sponsors a Little League team in Nicaragua. "The coach I had when I was 10 said, 'So, are you gonna help us?' I said, 'Of course.'"

Navarro is thrilled to carry the title of The DCG's 2023 Outstanding Young Alumnus, happy that it provides another opportunity for him to express his gratitude to the school that set his dreams in motion.

"Dentistry is just amazing," he says. "You can touch so many lives." DCG

Dr. Navarro
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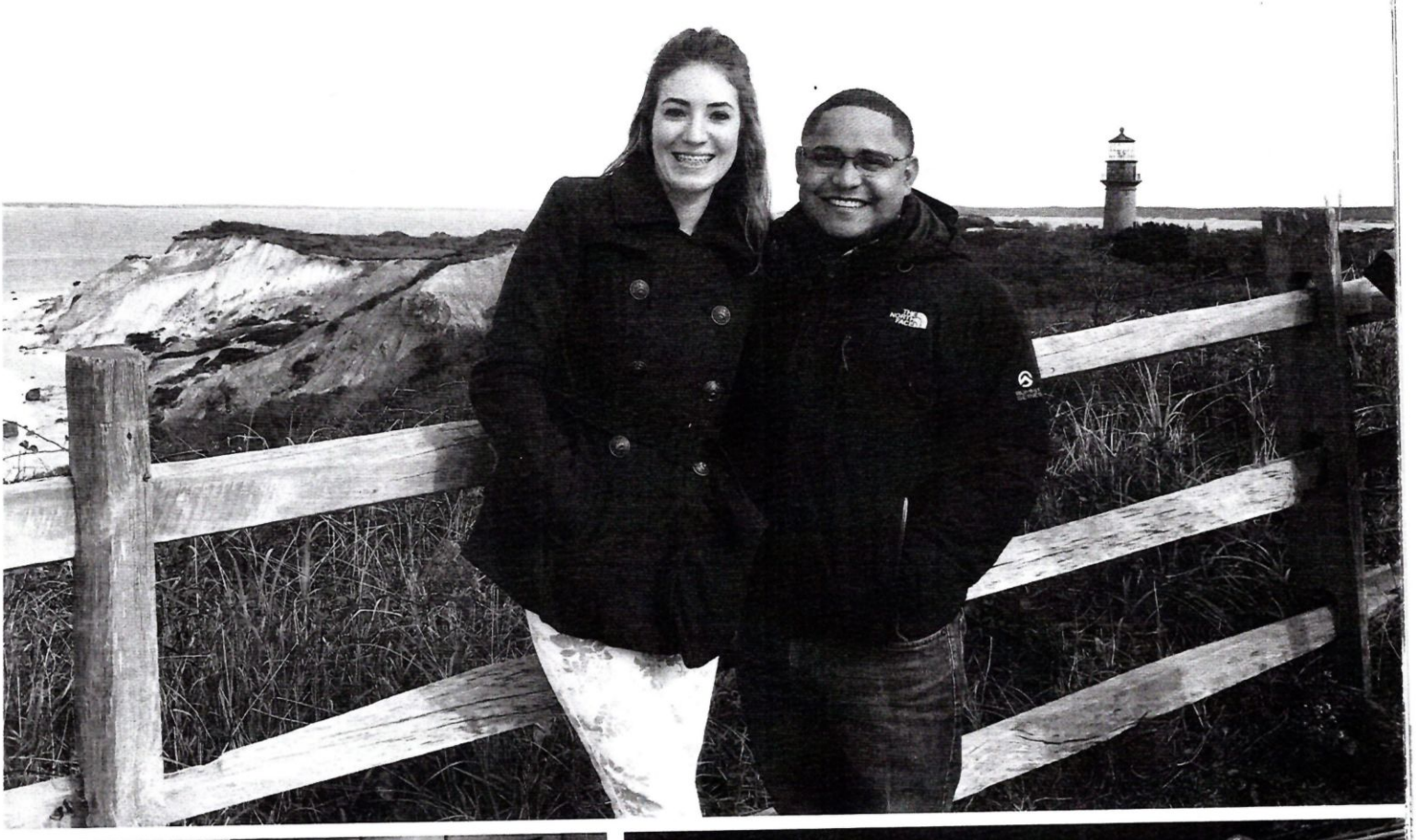

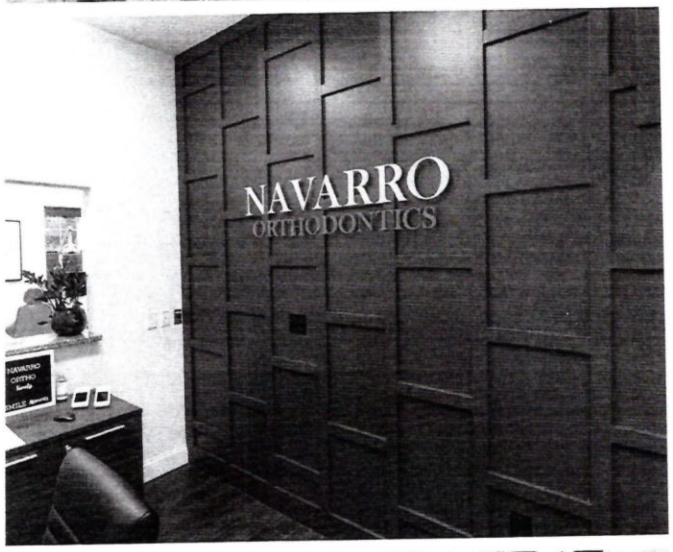
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