

Leonardo Palacios Sánchez, educator, researcher, and neurologist:

“Humanities decorate health sciences”

Nowadays, having published more than 100 articles in the field of mind and with more than 30 years in teaching and management at Universidad del Rosario, Dr. Palacios looks back, feeling the satisfaction of having left behind a legacy: books and research devotedly worked on, and having trained young people who are his greatest pride today.

By: Tania Valbuena
Photos: Ximena Violi

Were Van Gogh's pictures overwhelming beauty, a result of inspiration or of his neurological condition and excesses? Was Mozart just an eccentric musical genius, or did he also suffer from Gilles de la Tourette syndrome? Would Don Quijote de La Mancha have been the same without his disorders and hallucinations? Painter's exquisite sensitivity, musician's acid behavior, and Cervantes' unique charisma were always pleasant starting points to understand the interweaving of mind by Leonardo Palacios, an experienced professor, a neurologist, and a researcher at Universidad del Rosario.

“Arts decorate our work and make our activities more gratifying, especially this intense task in the health science,” says Palacios with bright eyes. As a researcher, he developed a passion for analyzing neuropsychiatric conditions in characters from art, history, and fiction. Nowadays, from isolation, he tells *Advances in Sciences* that he and his co-authors have not stopped researching the subject and that he is even preparing a neuroscience popularization project called *Neurodisney*, which is based on the analysis of characters from Disney–Pixar films.

Nowadays, having published more than 100 articles in the fascinating field of mind and with more than 30 years in teaching and management at his beloved university, he looks back with the feeling of satisfaction for having left behind a legacy: books and research devotedly worked on, and having trained young people who are his greatest pride today “because



they are great human beings dedicating their time and energy for the sake of humankind.”

Early motivation for culture

Palacios did not become a physician who loved “humanities” just by chance. Born in a Bogota home with seven siblings, he had a romance “with a large library that my parents had.” His love for the arts was reinforced at a very early age when he learned to play the piano, which he inherited from his father. Today, the instrument belongs to his son Leonardo, who teaches music, lyrical singing, choral and orchestral conducting, as well as being the musical director of Misi Producciones and professor of the musical theater program at Universidad del Rosario.

Because his parents appreciated the French culture a lot, Leonardo and his siblings studied at Louis Pasteur French High School in Bogota. However, it was his brother, Eduardo, who was “like a father to him,” who supported him in studying medicine. Eighteen years older, Eduardo Palacios created the Neurology Specialization Program at San José Hospital, in agreement with Universidad del Rosario, in 1977. Leonardo did his residency in neurology there to receive his degree.

Bonds with his alma mater

After graduating from high school, Palacios had three medical schools to choose from: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, and Universidad del Rosario.

“I applied to Universidad del Rosario, which has always had extraordinary prestige for its graduates and its importance for the country, even since we were the Viceroyalty of New Granada.”

Abriendo la caja negra

Una historia de la neurociencia



▲ Book by Leonardo Palacios published by Universidad del Rosario Publishing House in 2020. It is about a brief history of brain, nervous tissue, neurotransmitters, and the main conditions affecting the nervous system.

Palacios is convinced that “the graduates of this house are humanists, even if we come from sciences.” He invites us to remember that the first disciplines of this University were philosophy and theology to teach the doctrine of St. Thomas, jurisprudence, and medicine.

That academic life of yesterday can be breathed at the University's old facilities: in the cloister, where there is a beautiful art gallery in its walls; in the chapel of Our Lady of La Bordadita, with its collection of religious art; in the Historical Archive and Main Lecture Hall, where the portraits of many University presidents are present.

Medicine and humanity

While studying, Palacios was already interested in the history of medicine and medical humanities, inspired “by a fantastic professor, Juan Mendoza Vega, a physician, neurosurgeon, and columnist for 30 years” in *El Espectador*.

Mendoza impressed Palacios with his lectures on the history of medicine, deontology, and medical legislation, and particularly with a lecture he called Medical Etiquette in which he taught a physician's behavior in society.

He learned from his other mentor, a physician and professor of Medical Ethics, Edmund

Pellegrino, that “a person is more than his illness. This human being has a social environment, which must be explored as carefully as auscultating his heart, his abdomen, or his reflexes.”

Palacios teaches his students that “a physician should always wear an immaculate white coat, ironed, buttoned from top to bottom, and look into the eyes, smile, and invite the patient to break the ice.”

With all this learning, he graduated as a physician and surgeon in 1984. He performed his mandatory social service at the Children’s Clinic of Caja de Compensación Familiar Colsubsidio, and on weekends, he worked as a physician at the hotels of the said organization located in Paipa and Girardot. “It was a quiet year. I took advantage during spare times to go to San José Hospital, where I was allowed to do night rounds in the neurology service. At the Children’s Clinic, he met Edgar Hernández Arbeláez, an excellent neuropsychiatrist whom he accompanied in consultations while learning a lot about the subject.

He then entered the Neurology Specialization program at Universidad del Rosario and continued his residency “learning about the discipline, following my teachers, reviewing cases thoroughly, and using methodologies to understand what had happened with one medical condition or another.”

Captivated by France and its culture

Palacios went to France, where he studied child neurology at the University of Paris V. There, he says, in addition to meeting outstanding physicians, he was surprised by his experience in the epilepsy unit.

“The only mandatory and sacred thing for the team of professionals was to have lunch together, and a good lunch, not a *“sanguchito,”* but a good meal including a starter, main course, dessert, coffee, and fruit, accompanied by a good wine and, for those who wanted, a *“tabaquito,”* he laughs. “However, there was another rule,” he continues, “and that was not to talk about medicine during the entire lunch unless it was an emergency.” If someone did so, he or she should sing, recite, or was committed to taking sweets or chocolates as a very humanistic punishment. In Colombia, conversely, we sacrifice lunch or spare time for work.

“Parisians are great readers, they usually talk about novels,” he says. I used to go to concerts, exhibitions, and bought newspapers for one franc, which showed the 300 films of the week, museums, and presentations at the headquarters of different embassies or churches. At that time, it was free to enter the Louvre on

Life not only filled Palacios with academic success but with wisdom and personal experiences. “In that journey, I started studying emotional well-being and happiness that philosophers such as Aristotle studied.” He learned from Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, that “the goal of our life is to be happy and serve others,” he states.

Sunday, and all this, in combination with the scenery of the Seine, “could not have made the atmosphere more favorable.”

Added to all this was the fact that physicians often had conversations about history and humanities at work. I remember Michel Arthuis, the head of service, who knew a lot about pediatric history and neuropsychiatry. “While interviewing his patients, he could know what neurological condition the person might suffer from just by knowing their last name. He knew the ancestor and ethnographic origin of the majority of the surnames, and told us, for instance, that those of Celtic origin are more prone to spina bifida (a column malformation). Furthermore, Arthuis quoted authoritative figures from global history and medicine.”

A passionate teacher and researcher

When he came back to his country in 1989, Leonardo started teaching at the School of Medicine of Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. In January 1990, he joined Universidad del Rosario, where he started working as an assistant instructor, the initial level in a teaching career.

“I mainly worked at the San José Hospital, alongside my brother Eduardo and another very special professor, José Ignacio Hernández Cruz, an internist and cardiologist. We had “extracurricular” meetings with them to talk about history and art,” he recalls.

Subsequently, he was appointed the academic secretary and Head of Medical Education at that school. He was in charge of coordinating the rotating internship, medical-surgical specialties, and agreements with San José Hospital and other prestigious hospitals, where Rosario’s undergraduate and graduate students rotated.

“Those were fantastic times, when I met people like Luis Enrique Nieto Arango (1947–2020), who worked as the general secretary of the University at that time. He was passionate about the history of the Spanish language,” recalls Palacios. “Luis Enrique was the editor of the journal *Nova et Vetera*, an institutional publication whose publishing committee I joined on his invitation; a position I still hold with great pride.”

In academic ceremonies, he participated as the master of ceremonies. The charismatic Leonardo is still invited by the **Colombian Neurological Association (Asociación Colombiana de Neurología)** and other academic ceremonies to fulfill this role because “they know I like it.”

At that time, the scientific journal *Acta Neurológica Colombiana* had started to be published, and “there I began to submit and publish articles such as *La historia de la neurosífilis* and others, in the *Acta Médica Colombiana*, on a type of epilepsy that Fyodor Dostoevsky suffered from and which he showed through the experiences of Prince Mishkin, the protagonist of his novel *The Idiot*. The Muscovite author narrates through the character what he experienced when he had epileptic seizures. I have also written about the history of electroencephalography as well as epilepsy and headache.”

The dean of happiness

Perhaps the greatest honor in Palacios’ professional life was taking over, in September 2002, the deanship of the School of Medicine, invited by **Rafael Riveros Dueñas**, the president of the University at that time. Riveros was followed by **Hans Peter Knudsen Quevedo**, who ratified him in February 2003.

“We accompanied Dr. Knudsen during his three terms as the president with a magnificent work team, and after 12 years, we achieved significant progresses for the School of Medicine and Health Sciences. He would later be followed as the president by **José Manuel Restrepo Abondano**,” he said.

Leonardo wanted to return to the professorship, and therefore, left the position in December 2014 being followed by “a colleague whom I admire very much, **Gustavo Quintero Hernández**,” a physician from Universidad del Rosario, a general and transplant surgeon, and an expert in medical education. However, life not only filled him with academic success but also with wisdom and personal experiences. “On that journey, I started studying emotional well-being and happiness, which philosophers such as Aristotle studied.” He learned from Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, that “the goal of our life is to be happy and serve others.”

At the university, personal happiness also had its place: he fell in love with Ximena Violi Suárez, his current wife. Their daughter, María José, a plastic artist and graphic designer, and Dr. Palacios’ sons, Leonardo and Felipe, a journalist and communications coordinator for Cluster Incheape Daimler Colombia, respectively, complement the couple’s joy. Moved by his learning about this feeling, he asked Dean Quintero to open a Chair of Happiness, which was joined by very important professors such as Dr. Andrés Ramírez Ordóñez (the first professor to teach a Chair of Happiness in Colombia), Dr. María Isabel González Jaramillo, Dr. Gustavo Lara, and Dr. Catalina Liscano. “We thus managed to found the course **Educating for Happiness** in January 2015. Owing to the topics covered in it, the chair was linked to the deanship of the university environment.

Finally, in January 2019, he went with his wife to the World Happiness Summit at the University of Miami, where “there were no auditoriums with chairs, but with artificial grass, wooden benches, and cushions on the floor, as if it was a park. There were yoga and *mindfulness* lessons in the mornings before conferences, and many wrote letters to themselves to be received the following year to see whether they could achieve their goals.”

Entrepreneur, researcher, and prolific communicator

Nowadays he enjoys the business he founded with his wife, called *Felicitas*, and continues delivering speeches and offering consulting services.

“At the **NeURovitae Neurociencias** center and **NeURos** neurosciences research group led by Dr. Alberto Vélez since 1999, we have published approximately 60 articles in the humanities and neuroscience” says Palacios. “I work with the research group in the **History of Sciences, Technologies, and Professions**, directed by Dr. Emilio Quevedo. With him, Dr. Catalina Sánchez, and Dr. María Camila Núñez, we have published products on the history of internship and the book *El renacer de una*



↑ Leonardo Palacios at the School of Medicine in Paris. At the back is the painting *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière*, by André Brouillet, 1887.

ilusión: historia de la facultad de Medicina y de la Escuela de Medicina y Ciencias de la Salud de la Universidad del Rosario (Ediciones rosaristas 2021–Publishing from Rosario–2021).”

Among other activities, Palacios presents and publishes his research in Colombian and Latin American journals and continues to lecture on the history of epilepsy, Parkinson’s disease, neurology, neurosurgery, and more.

At the outreach level, from *Neurodisney*, Palacios wishes to publish many articles. “*Consideraciones neuropsiquiátricas de algunos personajes de las películas Buscando a Nemo y Buscando a Dory*,” was already published in *Nova et Vetera* journal last July, co-authored by medical students Ángela María Rodríguez Ucrós and Juan Camilo Hernández Pabón’s students of Medicine. They are currently finishing another article on the memory disorders of *Coco* in the Disney–Pixar film of the same name.

A life lesson

Palacios, with the enthusiasm of an adolescent, describes himself as “a researcher, committed, in love, and happy.”

When asked how he recommends that his pupils face a life full of challenges, he replies: “Study hard, with love and care, and, especially in these difficult times, **seek out teachers and parents to maintain reflective and formative dialogs with them.** You are the next generation!” 📖