

Humans of CDI: Women's History Month Edition

Featuring Elena Olson, JD

Executive Director, MGH Center for Diversity and Inclusion



Many of us know Elena Olson, JD, as the leader of the MGH Center for Diversity & Inclusion (CDI). As Executive Director CDI, Elena works on numerous initiatives and serves on multiple committees to promote diversity and combat racism. In her work, Elena has been instrumental in spearheading initiatives focused on policy review and advocacy through an anti-racism and equity lens, as well as physician, trainee, and research workforce diversity.

What you might not know is that Elena has been at MGH for 22 years. And that during that time Elena has witnessed tremendous change not only within the UiM community, but also for women at the institution.

To learn more about the history of MGH through Elena's valuable lens, keep reading.

Who are the women who have inspired you? How has this translated into your work?

I have dedicated much of my career, and life, to advancing equity, diversity, inclusion and justice, particularly in healthcare and education. When I think of why I do this, I come back to the women who have inspired me and helped shaped who I am today. These start with my late grandmother, mother and twin sister, the women I grew up with in Argentina and have known me the longest. Although we often don't see eye to eye on a number of issues, they taught me the importance of respect, empathy, kindness and unconditional love, especially during tough times when we are often at our worst. These core values have influenced the way I have raised my children, built relationships with family and friends, and advanced my professional career and volunteer experiences. I have dedicated my career to focus on others through an equity lens.

One renowned woman who has inspired me in my professional life is Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor, the first Latina and third woman to serve on the Supreme Court. She has been described as a judge with a "common touch" and empathy. Throughout her legal career, she worked tirelessly to promote the underserved and affirmative action. I have taken Sotomayor's advice to heart: "We educated, privileged lawyers have a professional and moral duty to represent the underrepresented in our society, to ensure that justice exists for all, both legal and economic justice." Early in my profession I, too, was a lawyer, and have had the privilege to lead the Center for Diversity and Inclusion for over two decades to help advocate for those underrepresented in medicine (UiM) and to address inequities in healthcare and education.

What have been the challenges that you've seen, especially for women, during your tenure? Have you seen any progress?

Women's History Month is often framed as inclusive – highlighting the experiences of all women – but the data shows that while white women have made incredible strides towards equality, many women of color are still impacted by those additional hurdles. Although more Latina and Black women are graduating from college and medical school today than ever before, the number of UiM women practically disappears as they move up the career ladder. For example, less than 2% of full professors in the U.S. are UiM women medical faculty, and an even smaller number are PhD full professors in the biomedical sciences. MGH is no exception, with only 1.2% of full professors who are UiM women.

I am very proud that over the past few decades CDI has had a significant impact in advancing UiM women's careers. For example, when we established the Physician Scientist Development Award (PSDA) 2004, applicants and recipients were more than 80% men. I was instrumental in changing the eligibility requirements of this award to be more inclusive of women. We recognized that for many women, the early years of their career often involved an inequitable burden of child rearing responsibilities and a challenge to focus on their academic careers full time. Seeing this as a barrier to opportunity, we extended the award eligibility from 5 to 10 years, bringing more women into the pool, and now we have more women receiving the PSDA than men, with several of these women now as full professors and in senior leadership positions.

What can leaders do to advance women of color?

We need to continue working together – especially those in leadership roles -- to ensure that we're amplifying the voices and careers of UiM women by investing in them and providing more opportunities for Black and Latina women to flourish. It is essential to give more UiM women a seat at the table in important committees and leadership positions, as well as increasing funding and mentorship to support varied career and research interests. UiM women also need to see role models and leaders who look like them. Those in leadership positions should hold themselves accountable to increase the number of UiM women full professors – we need to move the needle above 1.2%.

A question I often return to in my work is one that was posed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“Life's most persistent and urgent question,” he said, is “What are you doing for others?” To the leaders of this institution, I encourage you to look inward and ask yourself the same.