

HUMBERTO MATA '86: FIGHTING HIV AND AIDS IN ECUADOR

During his 20th Exeter reunion in 2006, Humberto Mata '86 decided it was time to give back. Listening to several classmates describe how they changed careers to work in non-profit, educational and social services fields, he was inspired. After 18 years in finance and small business, Mata wanted to focus on a cause that mattered to him and his community.

Growing up in Ecuador and the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, he witnessed friends and classmates test positive for HIV and eventually perish from AIDS because there were no approved or effective medications at the time. "I always thought that someday I would try to do something about it and the rising epidemic worldwide," he says.

Three months after the reunion, Mata and his life partner, Maximiliano Novoa, launched Fundación VIHDA, a nonprofit based in Guayaquil, Ecuador—Mata's hometown and the country's largest city. The organization uses education, HIV testing, anti-retroviral (ARV) drug treatments, media campaigns and community activities to prevent mother-to-child HIV and AIDS transmission.

Since its inception, VIHDA has counseled and tested 106,650 pregnant women for HIV who received prenatal care and/or given birth at the Maternity Hospital in Guayaquil. Of those women, VIHDA helped treat 502 positive cases in partnership with the hospital and the Ecuadorian Ministry of Health, providing ARV treatments to the mothers and their newborns.

Protocols require babies born to HIV-infected mothers be observed for 18 months before they can be considered HIV-free. "Graduation Day," when 18-month-olds with a healthy report complete the program, is "a very moving event" for Mata. Hospital and VIHDA staff members give mothers a "diploma of love" on behalf of their babies, thanking them for getting tested and taking their medication through pregnancy and birth. To date, all babies have graduated from the program and are HIV-free.

In Spanish, VIHDA is an amalgam of VIH, the acronym for HIV, and the word "vida," which means "life." "It's a way of expressing optimism that a person with HIV can lead a healthy



Humberto Mata '86 is working to ensure Ecuadorian babies are born HIV-free.

life and control HIV infection for many years with access to treatment and medication, like many other chronic diseases," Mata says.

In addition to medical intervention, Mata's organization has also launched public transportation billboards and media and school HIV and AIDS prevention campaigns to educate the Ecuadorian population about the dangers of transmission. Recently VIHDA opened the first private clinic in Ecuador dedicated to providing medical and psychological services to HIV and AIDS patients.

Despite these gains, VIHDA's fight is a tough one, as HIV cases in Ecuador have doubled in the last three years—from one in every 500 persons to one in every 213. But Mata remains hopeful. He expects HIV rates to eventually decline, as more nonprofit and private sectors commit to fighting the disease, and he hopes VIHDA will be at the forefront, not only in Ecuador but also in other Latin American countries.

Mata's leadership skills and ethos first formed at Exeter, where he participated in pro-democracy marches and served as Student Council president. "Exeter really taught me to be a leader, to speak out, to try to change something when I felt it could be done better," Mata says.

Mata continued his grassroots work in college, where he co-founded a group called Defeat Homophobia. In Ecuador, he has helped young adults become politically active and was recently elected to the board of Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). "None of [that] would have been possible without Exeter teaching [us] how to think, state and defend our own points of view as young men and women," he says.

—*Famebridge Witherspoon*