MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

PAULA DAVIS' EXTENDED FAMILY

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"If you can drive in South Oakland, you can drive anywhere," a young admissions and financial aid counselor, Paula Davis, told her new colleague, Linda Berardi-Demo. They were in the department vehicle, and Berardi-Demo, who didn't have a driver's license and, more importantly, didn't know how to drive, was behind the wheel. (She did have a learner's permit.) At Davis' urging, Berardi-Demo turned the key in the ignition. Together they bucked down the skinny, swarmed streets of the lower Pitt campus, beginning a very important friendship.

This is how Davis works—the hard part first. She teaches herself, and if the task is daunting, she might ask a friend to help. This is how Davis, a 4-foot-10 woman who grew up in a housing project on Pittsburgh's North Side, who majored in English and got her master's degree in communications, who is not a clinician, an MD, or a PhD, became the assistant dean of minority affairs of the School of Medicine. On June 9, she became the first individual to win the Chancellor's Affirmative Action Award—which usually honors entire programs, not individual employees.

Davis has led the School of Medicine's efforts to enroll underrepresented minorities, boosting enrollment by 30 percent since 1994 among such groups as Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans. And what's not been lost on students is how Davis and her staff offer academic grounding and even emotional support to help them achieve their goals. Davis' philosophy is to pull out all the stops: "Every question gets an answer. No one is ignored. No one is left behind."

The students who nominated Davis praised her for making the School of Medicine feel like home. For Davis, who did her undergrad and graduate work in the School of Arts and Sciences, it's only natural. "This campus has been my home since 1977," she says.

She describes the school as her family. Students have her home phone number; they're encouraged to use it. They send her Mother's Day cards. Berardi-Demo, now fully licensed to drive and the School of Medicine's director of admissions and financial aid, thinks of Paula as a sister. She calls Davis the consummate professional. Even in the muggy heat of summer, Davis is the one on the bus in the business suit, panty hose, and closed-toe high heels, not a bead of sweat on her smooth forehead. But Davis isn't *all* business—Berardi-Demo and she once pretended to be on the cast of *Les Miserables*. (That was when the two friends were out on the town in Boston.) And if you get Davis to talk about her children—Kathryn, 11, and Jason, 9, who has autism—she's likely to boast.

Asked if she knows the secret to Davis' success, Berardi-Demo responds, "Sagittarians need very little sleep." When pushed for a nonastrological explanation, she offers, "She doesn't believe in 'no.' I'd say, 'Paula, you better tell those people no,' but she just won't."

If you watch Davis at a table of aspiring students fresh from their first round of mock interviews for medical school admissions, you don't need anyone to tell you why she's held in such high regard. Davis is warm, responsive, and encouraging, even when doling out criticism. "You were nervous, huh?" she kids one young man who sighs, then laughs in response. Davis is an older sister who has all the answers. And there's nothing like watching the kids grow up. She's seen many of her recruits for the Medical Explorers program—which encourages minority students to pursue careers in medicine as early as high school—get their MDs from Pitt and begin practicing medicine in Pittsburgh. "Few things give me greater pleasure than to see our students grow from high school through their matriculation here," she says.

Berardi-Demo (whose own office has been lauded for its efforts at recruiting top-notch students) says that sometimes she and Paula wonder what they will be when they grow up. Davis says that in whatever incarnation, she will "keep fighting the good fight." One battle: Pitt is starting to lose top minority candidates to schools that can offer more funding; Davis has sounded the alarm for scholarship support.

"The composition of this country is changing as we speak," says Davis, who has pointed out before that patients in underrepresented populations are more likely to seek out doctors of the same ethnicity. "We must train a physician workforce that reflects our population," she continues. "This is a public health issue that we cannot ignore." ■