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Groups work to increase number of minorities in medical field

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PHOENIX -- With a growing minority population, Arizona is looking to keep pace by increasing the number of minorities entering the medical field.

Tour for Diversity in Medicine is helping make that push, but they aren't the only ones. It's the first time the tour comes to a community college and the first time it's in

Arizona.

More than 100 students went to Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale to learn about how to get into medical school. One of the biggest pieces of advice was to start early, and that's exactly what students at Alhambra High School are doing through a medical magnet program.

Most of Damian Fairbanks' students are minorities. "Our school population is more than 80 percent Hispanic," he said. It's not unusual to hear Fairbanks speak Spanish to get his students to remember medical terms.

Marco Zaragoza grew up in a Spanish-speaking household. "Growing up was tougher. My parents knew little to no English, and when it came down to homework, they only went to a certain level of school to the point they couldn't help me anymore," said Zaragoza.

Zaragoza said it was a struggle getting through school. "It's a huge accomplishment for me to make it this far," he said. He said his aunt helped him with schoolwork. "Without her, I probably wouldn't be here right now," he said.

"When I graduate, I'll be the second person in my family," he said.

According to the Association of American Medical Colleges' most recent report, fewer than 20 percent of medical school applicants were either Hispanic or Black. Marco and some of his classmates said they think minorities are often discouraged to go into medicine because of lack of confidence.

But with programs like Alhambra High School's medical and health studies magnet program, Zaragoza said there's a lot of support to get to medical school.

"Anybody can make it. Honestly, if anybody is saying that they can't, they can. Trust me," said Zaragoza.

Mentors through Tour for Diversity in Medicine hope their stories will inspire other minorities to follow in their footsteps.

Students have different reasons for their struggles in school. Karen Jamil said her family wasn't supportive at first. She said her family would say, "She should get married when she's young and not go to school."

Donald Thomas had several reasons. "Money issues throughout college, not having the confidence within myself to be able to complete classes," he said.

"Neither of my parents went to high school, so at times I feel it's difficult because they

can't really help me, or I really can't ask them. But I know they're just really supportive, and they want me to do good," said Lea Blake.

Doctor Minerva Romero Arenas had a very similar issue growing up. "My parents also were not familiar with the system, and I had to figure out a lot of things on my own," she said. Now she is a physician and general surgery resident.

She said finding mentors is key. "These are the people that are going to help you when there were times that my own family couldn't provide the right guidance; I was able to find mentors who could provide specific advice," said Romero Arenas.

Romero Arenas said minorities could get discouraged when they do not see many familiar faces. "When everything you see is different, you think well maybe that's why we're not doing this. Maybe subconsciously you know that there's a challenge, and you're not sure if you're going to be able to make it through," she said.

But once they get to their goal, Romero Arenas said they can greatly impact healthcare. "Because these are the physicians who usually go back and practice in rural communities in underprivileged or underserved areas," said Romero Arenas.

This is Tour for Diversity in Medicine's 5th tour. They hold a day-long workshop to teach students the ins and outs of getting to medical school. The tour is heading to California next.