

# Anita Figueredo

DR. ANITA FIGUEREDO describes a direct course when she considers the path her life has taken for the past 93 years. She wanted to be a doctor and became San Diego's first female surgeon. She wanted a family and gave birth to nine children with pediatrician William J. Doyle, who was chief of staff at Scripps Hospital in the

It's difficult to comprehend the scope of Figueredo's accomplishments; it's even harder to believe she is in her 90s. She sits in her La Jolla living room, with its expansive view of the azure Pacific, dressed in a bright blue print jacket and white slacks. Her snow-white hair frames still-inquisitive brown eyes, and though she's barely 5 feet tall, she reaches up to embrace guests at the Spanish colonial home she's lived in since 1956. There's a portrait of Figueredo, painted by her beloved late husband Bill, over the fireplace.

Dr. Sarita Eastman, Figueredo's daughter, says the painting was inspired by the same photograph that adorns the cover of the book she authored about her mother's life, *A Trail of Light*. The original version, packed into a binder, was a labor of love completed 16 years ago. It's filled with family history, genealogical research and far more life challenges than the ever-optimistic Figueredo would acknowledge. When she was chosen to be honored with a Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla's Lifetime Achievement Award earlier this year, there was cause to get the memoir published.

Sarita's husband, Dr. Brent Eastman, chief medical officer at Scripps, was asked to be the presenter of the story. Figueredo was his first surgical partner when he came to La Jolla in the 1970s.

"My husband adores my mother and thought she was a brilliant surgeon," says Sarita Eastman. "The presentation was well received, and Scripps said, 'If you publish the book, we'll purchase 200 copies as gifts for our donors.'"

The story begins with the life of Sarita's maternal grandmother, Sarita Villegas, and her brief but unhappy marriage to Roberto Figueredo. Villegas emigrated from Costa Rica with her cousin and 5-year-old Anita in 1921. An expert seamstress, Villegas settled in Harlem and worked two jobs, while little Anita received an education.

"I understood clearly that if it weren't for her, I wouldn't be able to do what I was doing," Figueredo explains.

Figueredo spotted her future husband in medical school. "As my gaze passed him, a voice said to me, 'This is the man,'" she says, smiling at the memory.

Nine pregnancies didn't hold Figueredo back; she was one of a few woman physicians who became expert in the field of surgical oncology. Tragedy, including the deaths of three of her sons (two died in accidents; one died slowly of brain cancer), failed to overwhelm her. "My faith gave me the strength to bear these things," she says. "There was never any question that God didn't know what He was doing."

A devout Catholic, Figueredo met Mother Theresa in 1960 after writing to her. She still "gets chills" describing how the nun declared that she had prayed for them to meet—and when Mother Theresa prayed for something, "It happened."

"I think we are inspired less often than we should be," says Sarita Eastman. "This is one of the most inspiring stories you'll ever read." ■



Dr. Anita Figueredo and Sarita Eastman

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1960s. She admired Mother Theresa, struck up a friendship with her that lasted more than three decades and, like the nun, became a model of community service.

"I knew that I was doing something very unusual at the time, but it was what I wanted to do," says Figueredo. "What I'm grateful for is that nobody interfered. I was helped along the way, and my husband was ideal. My children were understanding, and I was able to fulfill everything I wanted to do."