

Odette Bolano

Blazing a Trail for Women in Health-Care Leadership



In August 2018, Odette Bolano was named the president and chief executive officer of Saint Alphonse Health System (SAHS). Previously, she was the president of Saint Alphonse Regional Medical Center (SARMC).

Odette became president of SARMC in 2015 and left the system in July 2018 to accept a job in Florida. After the CEO opening was announced, she received multiple messages from physicians, colleagues, and community leaders asking her to consider returning to Saint Alphonse. This outreach led to discussions with Trinity Health leadership about the role. Following extensive discussions, the SAHS Board unanimously supported her to be CEO of the health system.

Odette serves on the Leadership Council for the Carole Emmott Fellowship, which strives to achieve gender equity in the health-care field. The fellowship provides a unique opportunity for exceptional women leaders in health to accelerate their careers. Fellowship recipients complete a fourteen-month program with hand-selected mentors and a nationwide network of senior executive leaders in the field.

A Multicultural Family Committed to Higher Education

Odette immigrated to this country from Colombia, South America, when she was eight years old. Her children are first-generation Americans. But Odette isn't Colombian. Her mother, who has eight siblings, comes from a Lebanese family. Her father, who has three siblings, is Italian. Their parents—Odette's grandparents—ended up in Colombia during a famine.

Despite their modest means, Odette's grandfather and his brothers were very committed to educating her father and his eight siblings to be professionals. "Every single one of them became a professional," Odette says. Her father is a doctor, and his father was estranged from the family, so Odette's dad worked three or four jobs while he was in medical school just to pay for the tuition. Once he became a practicing physician, he married Odette's mother.

“My mom was a lab technologist running a blood bank in Bogotá, which is the capital of Colombia,” Odette says. “That was in the mid- to late 1960s, when people around the world saw America as this incredible, wonderful place where you could create your dreams and be successful.”

When Odette was eight years old, her family moved to Kansas City, Kansas, so her father could complete a two-year fellowship in public health. His plan was to go back to Colombia once that was finished. But then they decided to go back to Colombia, sell everything they owned, and emigrate to the United States. When her father got a job in public health, specializing in the treatment of infectious diseases at a New York City hospital, it was difficult for the family to leave their roots in South America.

Atypically Independent

Because she was the only girl in a traditional Hispanic family, Odette’s father wanted her to be independent.

“He knew the boys would be fine. But he wanted to make sure that I had my own profession and could stand on my own two feet,” Odette explains. “At that time, it wasn’t common for a woman to work in a profession. I think my dad wanted me to be independent because he came from a broken home, and it was hard for him to see his mother struggling to raise children by herself. She was educated, but she never had a profession. I also think he didn’t want me to ever end up in an abusive relationship where I was dependent on a man and feeling trapped. So, I think that women were pretty powerful in his life. And he married a woman who had her own profession.”

The family moved to Jamaica in Queens, New York, and stayed there for eighteen months. Neither she nor her parents spoke much English yet. And when they moved to Kansas City, Odette’s mother met a very kind man at the blood bank in a hospital. “She was explaining that she didn’t speak English, but she was a knowledgeable med tech. He said to my mom, ‘Tell me what the blood types are.’ And she spouted them off. He said, ‘You’re hired.’ Oh, my God. We were so grateful that someone had faith in her and was able to look beyond the language issue.”

In Kansas City, the schoolteachers thought Odette’s older brother was mentally ill because he kept to himself. But the reason he was quite was because he didn’t know English. “But kids are resilient, and they learn languages really quickly,” Odette says. “In less than a year, we were all speaking English pretty well.”

Odette attended a small all-girls’ Catholic high school. In the middle of her junior year, her family moved to a small town outside Houston, Texas. Moving so many times taught her how to adapt to changing environments. She had to figure out who she was.

“My parents never wanted us to lose our heritage and who we were. So, we were expected to always speak Spanish at home,” Odette recalls. “I think that that’s hard for kids because they don’t want to be different.”

Once they got to Texas, Odette’s father enlisted as a Reservist in the US Army. “He was so grateful for the opportunities that this country provided him,” Odette says. “He got called up, and he served during Desert Storm. He really believed in the values of this country.”

Nursing as a First Step Toward Leadership

After he served at Fort Hood for eighteen months, her dad established a private practice as a pediatrician. And just as his family had been committed to higher education, Odette's dad set out to make sure his kids got a great education. One of Odette's brothers is an orthopedic surgeon, one is a dentist, and another is a financial planner.

Being surrounded by family members in health-care professions, Odette wanted to get into leadership in health care. To do that, she felt like she needed to start her career with a clinical background. She had known CEOs of health-care organizations who had never worked in clinical care. "When you're in health care, you're dealing with people at their most sacred and most vulnerable times. You have to remember that," Odette says. She believes leaders in the field must work with patients to truly understand the complex spectrum of health care.

So, she went into nursing school at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. Her dad pushed her to succeed more than he pushed her brothers. "He wanted me to be independent and to never feel dependent on somebody else." She finished the four-year program in three years. Her parents received a letter stating that Odette had met all the requirements to move into the honors program.

But Odette was already super busy, taking eighteen credit hours every semester. She told her father she didn't want to participate in the honors program. He wouldn't take no for an answer, so Odette joined the program. She's glad she did.

Odette began her career as a nurse in the intensive care unit at Texas Medical Center in Houston. Shortly into her career, a group of physicians told Odette they were going to build a surgery center—the second freestanding surgery center in the state of Texas. Although Odette had no surgical background other than her schooling, the physicians asked her if she would help them build the surgery center. She said yes. "I was young and excited and willing to blaze the trails," she says.

But not everyone was so accommodating to Odette. She says, "TMC had an ambulatory surgery center. It was kind of a new and upcoming thing. I made an appointment to speak to the administrator, who was a nurse. They were all nurses at that point. I wanted to get some knowledge. She asked me what my background was, and I told her I was an ICU nurse. She quickly dismissed me and told me not to waste her time."

But that didn't discourage Odette. "I am a fast learner, and I love to learn," she says. "So, I learned a lot about certificate of need requirements because we were working with a law firm to get that approval. I learned the ins and outs of surgery centers to the point that I became a consultant for struggling surgery centers. I did that for about eight years while I was newly married and having kids."

During that time, Odette also completed a master's degree in health-care administration. By that time, she had become bored in the surgery center. She began doing consulting as a side gig. "When I finished my master's degree, I was ready to come back to the hospital setting and became the director of a hospital in Houston. It just progressed from there," she says. "I was there for about a year and a half when I was recruited to become a chief nursing officer. Then I was with Columbia HCA for eleven and a half years. Then I went to Ascension Health, which was, at that time, the largest Catholic health system in the country."

Odette continued to progress upward, becoming the COO of a health system in Tucson, Arizona.

Passionate About Increasing the Number of Women in Health-Care Leadership

Being a woman of color in a world of Caucasian men is not something Odette has focused on. “Maybe I was oblivious to that,” she says. “Until I was deep, deep into my career, I didn’t realize how big of an issue the gender gap was. But there are few women in health-care leadership. So, my passion now is to help other women who are struggling.”

One-way Odette became sensitive to the fact that she was an anomaly in a male-dominated group was a funny thing that happened at a board meeting she attended. She was at a cocktail party the evening before, and she was the only woman there. “I knew a lot of those gentlemen, and we were standing around. People were having drinks and *hors d’oeuvres* before dinner,” she recalls. “Texas gentlemen are pretty chivalrous. Somebody who knew me pretty well came up to me and whispered in my ear, ‘You know, none of us can sit down until you sit down.’ We just need to be cognizant that women should be comfortable providing their insights, knowledge, and skills.”

Odette is passionate about helping increase the numbers of women in leadership roles in health care. But she doesn’t want to become a politician. Instead, she is involved with an organization called the Carol Emmott Fellowship. She is on the board and also serves as a mentor for women who are trying to get into senior leadership positions in health care.

“That’s my way of giving back—being a woman of color in the room and being able to tell my story,” she says.

Organizations—in health care as well as other industries—would benefit from having more women and minorities serve beside their male counterparts. A 2018 McKinsey study shows that boards are more effective and more profitable when they have higher diversity and more women on their boards.

According to the consulting firm’s 2018 report “Delivering Through Diversity,” the more diverse the leadership team, the better the company’s financial performance. The study looked at the profits and value built by more than one thousand companies in twelve nations. Companies ranking in the top quarter for gender diversity were 21 percent more likely to see above-average profitability than those in the bottom quarter. And when it comes to ethnic diversity, companies in the top quartile (specifically among executive positions) were 33 percent more likely to see above-average profitability than those with the least ethnic diversity among executives.¹

Yet companies have not harnessed the power of female leadership to the extent they should. Odette has read a lot about this issue. “Women and men tend to be mentored differently. There is an expectation that the male has the hard skills of finance and business, so the mentoring of men is more about networking. Women are perceived to be the worker bees and are not exposed to networking opportunities. They do not get to share their knowledge in strategy discussions. I don’t think we are aware of these discrepancies between the genders. When women are direct, it is perceived differently than when a man is direct.”

Odette is very intentional about ensuring that the boards she serves on mirror the communities they serve.

1. Vivian Hunt, Lareina Yee, Sara Prince, and Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle, “Delivering Through Diversity,” McKinsey & Company, January 2018, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity>.

A Single Mom While Ascending the Leadership Ladder

Odette's children were three and five when she and her ex-husband got divorced. About three years after the divorce, the couple settled into a healthy friendship and began taking their kids on trips together. When Odette had to move for her career, she left every support system she had. Her ex-husband knew her career was important to her, and he didn't hold her back from moving forward.

She considers her children a gift and wouldn't change anything. "I've got the most wonderful, sensible, incredibly honest, and caring kids," she says. "Things happen in our lives that teach us life lessons. We don't prepare for them."

Odette's son, Tyler, is a physician, in a residency at Emory University in Atlanta. He will begin a fellowship in reconstructive surgery in June 2020. But her daughter is somewhat resistant to a formal career path—at least for now.

"My daughter, Krysta, took off for eight weeks to Southeast Asia by herself using an app, with a knapsack, staying in hostels to immerse herself and learn about the culture," Odette says. "I can't wait to see how the millennials turn out twenty years from now. They've got to be one of the most fascinating generations in the past hundred years."

Odette wants her children to know what a strong woman is and what that means to them in their lives when they choose who they will marry and how their relationships move forward.

Paying Her Success Forward

Sharing her story, supporting other women, and letting them know it's OK to be vulnerable is one-way Odette is paying all her good fortune forward. She has a mentee right now, and she is sharing with her the mistakes she has made in her career and life.

"Mistakes teach you lessons as you go forward, and they give you strength," Odette says. "Sometimes you make it through a situation when you didn't think you'd be able to. So, then you know you have the inner strength to get through the next one. I teach women to really believe in themselves."

She stresses that being a woman in a male-dominated world is not a crutch that women should overcome, although that is the message society sends to women too often.

Her advice to women is, "Be bold. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Draw from your inner strength. Surround yourself with people who are committed to your growth and mentoring. Don't sell yourself short. Push to be recognized. Volunteer to do projects that will enable you to stand out from the crowd."

This is the same advice she would give to men.

Odette has found inspiration in women from humble beginnings who became successful. She admires women who have called on their inner strength to move past obstacles in their lives. Her mother has always been an inspiration to her. Oprah Winfrey inspires here, too. "She's not your blonde, blue-eyed movie-star type. She's very inspirational in the way that she sees life and the humility and vulnerability she has shown," Odette says. "I think many of us have no difficulty being vulnerable and having the humility that allows us to be who we are."

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