

Dentistry is in my blood



Dental therapist **Karenn Helmrichne Davila** started out in dentistry in her home country, Mexico, before setting sail to work on cruise ships, where she met her Hungarian husband. They

moved to Europe together, with Karenn becoming a dental nurse in Bournemouth, then training to become a dental therapist. Today, as well as practising dental therapy, Karenn is involved with the British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy (BSDHT) and shares her dental journey through her Instagram, 'Smile of Pearls'.

Growing up in Mexico

I was born in 1984 in Mazatlan Sinaloa, a state in the North of Mexico. I have a very strict but amazing father who never let us have fast food or sweets. My diet was corn and protein-based, and a lot of fructose. Mexico is a very hot country with a wonderful variety of tropical food. Hence, the closest I ever came to sugar was through the sweetness of mango, papaya, banana, guava, and all those juice fruits, straight from our garden. Our proteins were only from local farmers. Thankfully in the 1990s, mass production was not available. Wednesdays were food delivery. The local farmer used to stop right in front of my house in his 4x4 truck – an authentic Mexican ranchero, always well presented, with his sombrero, sandals made from cowskin, a well-ironed short-sleeved shirt, and jeans. On his arrival, he would whistle very loudly in a very particular way to announce his presence to the whole neighbourhood.

My siblings and I used to run out of the house with our large containers for all the farm goodies. We had a huge 5 kg freshly handmade cheese along with raw milk and whatever animal had been slaughtered that day. My family was not fond of lamb, so we had either beef or pork. At home we had chickens. They were good times!



Drawn to dentistry

I believe it was my destiny to be involved in dentistry. It is deeply embedded in my Mexican roots. According to my ancient heritage, the Maya [the indigenous people of Central America] developed a complex mathematical and astronomical system in order to understand the universe, our land, and human beings, which in turn gave them the knowledge to create the Maya Calendar. As a result, we now know the meaning of our existence. It sounds deep, I know, but it is factual. According to the Maya, my date of birth means teeth and jaws, which depicted the footprint of my life. Hence, I'm naturally drawn to dentistry: it's in my blood. Dentistry has always been my career ambition.

In Mexico, there are no other dental professions other than bachelor of dentistry, not even a dental nurse title. Anyone wanting to get involved in a dental practice can simply apply for a job. So, I applied and I worked helping the dentist in whatever he needed – from cleaning the dental equipment to booking patients and doing the rota – even ordering the coffees. Yes, I was the nurse, receptionist, manager, you name it. I absolutely enjoyed it.

Sailing into the sunset

My first job on a cruise ship was assistant buffet steward, then I became the ice cream

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bar manager, and then the hostess of the main restaurants: the crown grill and signature collection. It was an eye-opening experience for me. I met people from various countries all with different mentalities. I learnt so many languages and I travelled around the globe. It was an unforgettable experience: life on board is like another world and I would highly recommend it.

My now-husband Peter also started as an assistant buffet steward, but for him, this was his second contract. He did not enjoy the ship as much as me. I guess it was because we had such little time to spend with each other – most of the time we were working 16 hours a day.

Moving to Hungary and the UK

When Peter and I moved to Hungary, for the first time in my entire life, I was living only from my savings. As for language barriers,

well, the language of love doesn't need words... but I did have linguistic problems for everything else. There are 44 letters in the Hungarian alphabet, whereas in Mexican 27 and in English only 26. Learning the language was my priority.

When we moved to the UK, my first job was housekeeping in a hotel in Bournemouth. I used to get paid £2.50 per room, so I was like Speedy Gonzales. I was doing the best I could, as you can imagine, but it was hard work.

As I began to understand the English working system, I wasted no time looking to return to my path in dentistry. One day I woke up and thought 'today is the day'. It was a gorgeous sunny day in 2009. I printed my CV at the local cybercafé and walked through the streets of Bournemouth. In Old Christchurch Road I saw a sign saying NHS and private dental practice. At the time I had no clue about the NHS, but all of a sudden, I imagined

myself working there, and so it happened. I started working as a trainee dental nurse at Bournemouth Dental Practice that summer.

Studying dental therapy

To gain a place to study dental therapy, I needed to get a distinction on each subject in my access to higher education course, so I did, and I got a few offers from universities in 2016. I picked the University of Plymouth and graduated in 2019.

Hand on heart, it was the most satisfying learning experience I've ever had. From day one at the University of Plymouth, I got the full experience of working in a multidisciplinary team. We learnt as a whole dental team, working and studying together: dental nurses, dental students, and of course us dental hygienist and therapist students. A brilliant educational setting.

As I approached graduation, I recall doing the maths, figuring out when to apply for jobs as a dental therapist, because I needed my GDC registration first. I decided to get a job as a dental nurse and then apply for dental therapist jobs. Little did I know that I would be working as a dental therapist already by 5 August 2019, utilising my full scope of practice. Just 19 days after the graduation ceremony I received an offer from BUPA and was over the moon. They offered me a full job as a dental therapist at their two local branches, Plymstock and Plymouth. In both practices I worked alongside some of my clinical supervisors from Plymouth university, it was amazing!

One of the former dental hygienist and therapist programme leads asked me if I would like to work alongside her and deliver restorative treatments to her patients on Saturdays at the Plymstock branch. I obviously accepted it!

So there I was working six days a week with the most aspiring clinicians I knew and having the time of my life, living my dream!

It's difficult to pinpoint just what I enjoy about dental therapy, but it is definitely an endorphin release when you are the one to change someone's life, by giving them confidence. These sensations are addictive, hence I keep doing my best for every single person who walks through my surgery door.

BSDHT treasurer

In 2019, I found out that I won The Jameson Effective Prize during my graduation ceremony. This is an award given by the BSDHT and the University of Plymouth to the student who has carried out the highest number of dental treatments with

the highest number of excellent grades for dental treatments. I was chuffed to get such a renowned prize.

Up to that point I had no clue about the wonderful organisation that is the BSDHT.

In my spare time I love baking. I love every country's confectionery, but I always do my own twist to every recipe. For instance, I love using raw tequila in the traditional Italian tiramisu; I call it tequilamisul!

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Days later I contacted them to thank them personally for such a fabulous award. Thereafter, I received an invitation to attend the Oral Health Conference in Wales. I received two tickets covering the whole two days of the conference and the gala dinner. I couldn't believe my eyes because I was probably more excited about the gala dinner than the conference itself. I'm mad about fashion, dressing up, wearing heels, and all that sexy stuff, so that was music to my ears.

Subsequently, I met fabulous Julie Deverick, an extraordinary person who helped me massively during the COVID-19 lockdown, for which I will be forever grateful. As a result, I decided to get involved with BSDHT. I am now the treasurer and social media coordinator of the Southern Regional Group and a coach/mentor for the BSDHT Coaching and Mentoring scheme programme.

Family and baking

I haven't been home for eight years now. It's a long time to be away from home, but my siblings come to England often, so it's not too bad. My younger sister Zulema just came to visit me. She stayed for a month and left only two weeks ago. You should have seen her luggage! It was filled with all sorts of Mexican chillies, traditional biscuits, chocolate, and herbs. Many Mexican herbs are unheard of in England, so those were the ones I needed the most. She also brought some other Mexican equipment to cook in a very authentic Mexican style here in England, my new home.

You can ask the 2019 dental cohort from the University of Plymouth. They had the pleasure of tasting my delicious bombshell at Derriford Unit. I remember my husband helping me to get the one-metre cake in the boot of the car, transferring it to the clinic through the back door, and setting it up in our lecture room ready for tea time.

Apart from that, I do my best to keep fit. I have now realised that actually, a year's worth of gym membership allows me to buy good quality gym equipment. Hence, I have no excuse now, with a home gym.

Married to dentistry

I currently work at one clinic in Salisbury Tuesday–Thursday and an alternate Monday and have recently accepted an offer from another high-tech clinic in Winchester where I'll be doing alternate Fridays and Saturdays. I've not worked on Fridays for a while, but I just couldn't stay away from dentistry, so I'm sort of full time again.

Just like every ambitious woman, I keep hustling to meet my goals, but regarding my career ambitions, a little tooth fairy once told me to 'move your moves in silence'. So watch this space!

There are no words to describe the sensation I experience every day at work. I am fulfilled, I get paid to do my hobby, and every day is a fab day. I am in love with my career choice. You could say I'm married to dentistry (don't tell Peter)!

Interview by Kate Quinlan

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