

Elise Swanson
Southern California College of Optometry, class of 2013
VOSH California Optometry Student Scholarship Program

I often used to wonder if life would be different if my last name were Ochoa. Sixty years ago, my Mexican-American grandparents, Alice and Hector Ochoa would have answered this question with a tight, “yes”. In fact, my grandmother and namesake, originally named Elisa, changed her name with these thoughts in mind. She raised my mother and two aunts without teaching them Spanish; fearing that an accent would discourage opportunities. And I always shake my head when my mother laments her involuntary destiny.

So, at the age of 12, I asked my mom to put me in an after-school Spanish language program and I have spent the last ten years learning the language on my own. I majored in Spanish and linguistics at UCLA, studied in Spain for a month, volunteered in a Costa Rican medical clinic and read Harry Potter in Spanish, too.

I’ve worked hard to achieve my level of acquisition and enjoyed every moment of it. It has refreshed my attitude on life because I’ve discovered that learning a language requires a proactive mindset, with motivation to reach out and talk to people in any community. It requires the courage to speak-up and practice. These are some advantages that learning a second language provides; with opportunities that my grandparents didn’t anticipate. Now, as a member of the class of 2013 at the Southern California College of Optometry, I want to use these language-learning qualities in an optometric-specific setting. With this scholarship provided by the Santa Clara County Optometric Society I hope to learn, first-hand in rural El Salvador, optometric relevant Spanish and also, about how to overcome the challenges of communicating openly and achieving a professional balance with patients individually in diverse situations.

As an optometrist, I will be a primary health care provider, with people from all walks of life seeking out my skills and knowledge. My mission, as a Doctor of Optometry, will be to uphold the high standards and responsibilities that come with being a primary health care provider and maintain my role as an active member of society. Three years ago, I volunteered in a Costa Rican free medical clinic for the underserved children of Nicaraguan immigrants without health care. There, in the green hills outside of the country’s capital, I learned how much people appreciate beneficence in health care. I was one of the only volunteers proficient in Spanish enough to help the patients, take patient histories, and tell their worried mothers how to administer the medications their children received. I know how rewarding it is to help someone overcome one challenge in their lives and this has inspired me to start my optometric career as a member of SVOSH, but this isn’t enough for me. I want to learn how to help someone in Spanish in a purely optometric setting. This is something I don’t have exposure to; yet. As a first year, our time in the clinic is limited, but I know that I will be helping a Spanish-speaking population there, and in vision screenings in my near future. And because I was not lucky enough to have my parents teach me Spanish from a young age, I need to work on it on my own. I know that this trip to el Salvador will help me tremendously achieve my goal in pursuing perfect fluidity in Spanish. I’ve learned everything I can out of a book, and now I need to put myself out there and use everything that I’ve worked to achieve in the real world.

I want to prepare myself for what I will encounter here at SCCO as a student and eventually as a practicing O.D. Not only does learning another language require a proactive mindset, but so does learning about how to become an efficient optometrist. It is my belief that working in diverse settings will best prepare me for the challenges that I will see in the clinic and elsewhere as an O.D. Not only is this trip to El Salvador about learning optometric Spanish, to me, it is also about learning the best way to take care of diverse and challenging patients and creating a trustful patient/doctor relationship in any situation. As optometry students, in the clinic, I know that the more practice we get, the smoother we become. With these experiences working with patients of

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underrepresented groups of society, I will outfit myself with an awareness of cultures and empathies that I can bring with me in the real world as a practicing optometrist in the hopes that, one day, I will deliver efficient and specialized patient care.

I am an enthusiastic first-year optometry student hoping for the opportunity to bind my passions of learning Spanish, learning about Latino cultures, and learning how to be an efficient clinician, in El Salvador. One day, I hope to have my own practice and use these skills daily. I'm certain that my grandparents overlooked these possibilities related to Spanish speakers, but I know that I have not, and I hope to come back from this trip and tell my grandparents, in Spanish, about all of the people I was able to help and all the Spanish I have learned. I know it would make them and me proud. I would like to thank the Santa Clara County Optometric Society for presenting to us eager and loan-ridden students the opportunity to see the world and develop the skills that you and I understand are important to have as an O.D. *Muchísimas gracias!*