

2024 MARY BARKEY CLINICAL EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNER:

Julia Mendoza, BS, CCLS

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A moment from childhood lies etched in Julia Mendoza's memory—a nurse's instruction to "choose a finger." Little did Julia know, the needle's poke, sudden and unwarned, would be imprinted in her mind, and a fear of needles would linger into adulthood. Years later, when Julia learned about the child life profession, that moment resurfaced, stark and potent, emphasizing the profound importance of empowering children with the knowledge to alleviate distress during medical procedures.

As a student, Julia saw the value of child life while bearing witness to the gaping disparity in care experienced by non-English speaking families during hospitalization. Her supervisors commented on the ease with which she was able to build trust and rapport with Spanish-speaking families due to a shared language and culture. These experiences motivated Julia to commit to serving Spanish-speaking families in her career. Driven by empathy and fueled by her past, Julia embarked on her journey as a Certified Child Life Specialist with her compass pointed toward a purpose: to be the advocate, the ally, and the voice for those who tread the same path she once feared.



For over 17 years, Julia has passionately served as a Certified Child Life Specialist at Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston, Texas. Julia began her career in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), where she worked closely with infants and their families. Drawing upon her expertise in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI), she quickly observed the long-term impact of providing infants with developmentally appropriate play experiences during hospitalization. She partnered with physicians to develop a standard for developmental care to optimize developmental trajectories. Julia's transition from the NICU to a pediatric unit further broadened her perspective on the significance of play across all age groups. Specifically, her creativity in loose parts play has emerged as a hallmark of her skill set, elevating her effectiveness in facilitating therapeutic interactions with patients. Recognizing its pivotal role, play is the foundation of her interventions and a cornerstone of her practice.

Then, for 10 years Julia was dedicated to working with patients and families on the dialysis unit. During that time, she found immense fulfillment in supporting the long-term needs of patients with chronic conditions, especially in witnessing their progression across various developmental milestones. With each new phase, distinct challenges prompted Julia to adapt both herself and her interventions to meet her patients precisely where they were in their journey. Julia states, "it has been a privilege getting to know them differently due to the long-term relationship. It allowed me to take my interventions to a deeper level as I had greater insight at what personally impacted each patient."

Furthermore, Julia has upheld her dedication to culturally sensitive care by ensuring that every aspect of unit programming, from interventions to decorations, embodied inclusivity and fostered a supportive environment for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Multiple past patients and families have spoken about the emotional safety that Julia has provided them. Families have shared that her "persistence" and ability to "hold space" are some of the biggest influences that contributed to their positive coping throughout dialysis treatment.

In addition to her work with patients and families on the dialysis unit, Julia forged strong partnerships across the interdisciplinary team. Notably, through a collaboration with the unit's dietician, Julia led the development of a group program for patients and caregivers. Alongside her dietician colleague, Julia co-led intentional activities to address specialized nutrition and coping goals for children experiencing dialysis. Nurses and physicians have attested to the invaluable advantages they have gleaned from Julia's exemplary modeling, as it has enhanced their practice by equipping them with effective strategies to engage and communicate with patients.

As a Mexican American child life specialist, Julia acknowledges her minority status within both her department and the broader field, prompting her to explore the implications of her identity on her interactions within her team. Attending the inaugural Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) meeting hosted by the Association of Child Life Professionals (ACLP) proved to be a profound experience for Julia. It provided her with a sense of visibility and affirmation as she connected with fellow child life professionals of color. For the first time, Julia was able to fully process her past experiences, as well as gain the courage to explore what she could do differently.

Julia has always recognized the importance of providing care through a lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Yet, after the murder of George Floyd, she felt more urgency to connect with peers at the hospital and actively pursue equitable care for all. Through helping to create departmental DEI competencies and serving on the DEI committee, she has contributed to a new departmental framework that ensures child life services are in alignment with DEI values. Julia also represents child life in the hospital's Disparities of Health workgroup offering her expertise as a bilingual child life specialist to guide discussions and inform priorities alongside hospital leaders.

Although Julia did not have plans to leave her work on the dialysis unit, she could not ignore the passion she felt for directly supporting families in their own language. When a position opened within her child life team, Julia approached

leadership with an innovative vision to restructure the position and directly address the needs of Spanish-speaking patients and families. Julia has now spent the last two years providing child life services to Spanish-speaking families across the pediatric hospital. She has embraced her newfound role and successfully built strong relationships spanning multiple units and devised streamlined processes, all culminating in the establishment of an integrated and valued position. Julia's initial aspiration to become a child life specialist dedicated to serving Spanish-speaking families evolved into a reality, filling her with a profound sense of purpose and pride.

Julia's commitment to fulfilling multiple roles within her department exemplifies her embodiment of the essence of teamwork. Staff members frequently turn to Julia as a source of support and inspiration, drawn to her collaborative approach of "let's work together and problem-solve" rather than her years of seniority. She serves as a reflective practice group facilitator where she values being able to process aloud the day-to-day practices of child life with peers. Julia has also served as a student coordinator for more than 15 years, influencing the clinical training of more than 40 students. She developed Children's Memorial Hermann's first practicum program, revamped their internship, and achieved ACLP internship accreditation on the first attempt

without any revisions. She has said, "I think of students like seedlings. We're here to pour the water to help them grow. It's hard being a student, so I want them to have someone who will both challenge and support them." Whether in her role as an unofficial staff mentor, reflective practice facilitator, or student coordinator, Julia views them all as symbiotic processes where she gains just as much as she pours in.

When asked about the source of her enduring passion for her work, Julia attributes it to her unwavering sense of curiosity. Reflecting on her journey, she shared, "we all go through waves of finding our identity, who we are and what role we want to play. Something about me, I'm always wanting to learn. When I find myself stagnant, I ask what I need to do to continue to grow—having peers to process with and the resiliency within me is important. There are going to be patients that impact you, some in hard ways. You must be able to sit with that. You can ride those waves if you allow space for those feelings, process with others, and continue to look for that spark that comes from curiosity."

Julia Mendoza's tireless dedication, unwavering passion, and exceptional commitment to delivering top-tier child life services have earned her the prestigious recognition of the ACLP's Mary Barkey Clinical Excellence Award.

