

‘We survived, now it’s time to thrive’

Perseverance and passion to become doctors in Cuba

by **J.S. Adams**
Contributing Writer

Surviving the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in Havana, Cuba, has been a seven-year-long process for Maryam and Ruqayyah Farrakhan. Maryam, 29, daughter of Louis Farrakhan Jr. and Lesil Farrakhan, and Ruqayyah, 30, daughter of Student Supreme Captain of the Nation of Islam Mustafa Farrakhan and Karen Farrakhan—both made the bold decision to leave the United States behind, and travel more than 1,000 miles to become doctors.

For nearly a decade, they dreamed about their graduation day. It was a long road filled with countless challenges, but the two stuck to the journey, which would prove to be life changing.

A once in a lifetime opportunity

Ruqayyah Farrakhan always saw herself in the health field. That desire lingered her whole life—prompting her to study community health with a focus on rehabilitation at the University of Illinois. After she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in science in 2012, she had a conversation with her grandfather, the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, who always knew his granddaughter aspired to become a doctor.

The Minister talked about the scholarships that had been extended to the Nation of Islam to study medicine in Cuba. Ruqayyah traveled to the island to see what it was like.

“I never really traveled out the country much growing up,” she said. “So when I came overseas, it was a shock. You know, a different culture and I don’t think I was mentally prepared to live overseas.”

When she came back to the U.S., she spoke to her cousins, including Maryam, about the opportunity.

“I remember saying all of the pros about the program, like going one by one,” recalled Maryam. She even told her cousin that if she had an opportunity like that, she would take it. “I wasn’t talking about that situation for myself ... just saying if I were her, I would do it,” said Maryam.

As Maryam entered her senior year as a mathematics student at UCLA, Ruqayyah took a gap year to figure out which path she wanted to take. During that time, she had an honest conversation with her brother, which helped her decide about Cuba. She asked Maryam to go with her, calling her out on the words she spoke about the opportunity a few months earlier.

Even though Maryam had plans to get her master’s degree after she graduated from UCLA, this offer was appealing enough to make her change course.

“I really felt like, okay, this is an opportunity of a lifetime, so I would be insane if I didn’t even try,” Maryam explained. “My whole desire was to help Black people through education. Helping Black people through health and wellness so that we can become educated, that’s also important as well,” she said.

After Maryam finished her senior year, she and Ruqayyah were accepted into the Latin American School of Medicine program and packed their bags to head overseas.



Photo: Courtesy of Ruqayyah Farrakhan

Dr. Ruqayyah Farrakhan and Dr. Maryam Farrakhan made the decision to leave the United States and travel to Cuba to become doctors.

‘My whole desire was to help Black people through education. Helping Black people through health and wellness so that we can become educated, that’s also important as well.’

—Dr. Maryam Farrakhan

Doing the work

Although Ruqayyah had taken Spanish courses in school, she says she was not prepared to have a conversation when she arrived in Cuba in August 2013. Maryam didn’t know one word of the language. That was also the case for several other students, who represented more than 100 countries at ELAM.

The first year laid the foundation of their medical journeys. Ruqayyah and Maryam spent the first six months of the program in an intensive Spanish immersion course, which taught them the Spanish language. The last six months were spent reinforcing Spanish competency through pre-med coursework.

The pair went through several different rotations, including internal medicine, general surgery, pediatrics, psychiatry and many more. After completing her obstetrician gynecologist rotation (OB/GYN), which was her chosen specialization, Maryam went back to do an internship in the fall of 2019.

She says she was so dedicated to her patients, that one of them called out her name when pushing out her baby. Her daughter’s name was even inspired by Maryam’s. This meant a lot to her, especially as someone who’s passionate about the field.

“Women are dying from childbirth, or childbirth-relat-

ed complications [in the United States], and that’s unacceptable in a country that’s first-world, not only that but considered to be a leader or leading in medical technology and science and research and innovation,” Maryam said. “I know that I can make a difference,” she added.

Ruqayyah’s passion rests in family medicine. “You can talk to people before they even create poor behaviors and you can clip a lot of their medical issues early,” she said. “I feel like Black people should be seen by Black doctors, because we understand—or those of us that do understand—the struggle and the plight that we deal with on the daily,” Ruqayyah explained.

During their time in school, the two cousins practically did everything together, which only made their bond much stronger.

“We were definitely able to watch the growth of each other and seeing us overcome challenges in different rotations that we may have had difficulty with,” Ruqayyah said. “We definitely saw where we excelled. It was an interesting process, and it was always great to have someone you could speak English with whenever it permitted.”

Trials and tribulations

Being hundreds of miles away from home meant Ruqayyah and Maryam missed important moments in their family’s lives.

Knowing that she couldn’t be there for the different milestones of her family and close friends was a trial, explained, Maryam. “There were so many things that happened while we were in medical school.”

Mother Tynnetta Muhammad, wife of the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad and a beloved figure in the Nation of Islam, passed away in 2015. Early on in Maryam’s studies in Cuba, her godmother the daughter of Abdul Akbar Muhammad; international representative of the Nation of Islam—Samaiyah Azziz, passed away.

Continued on page 31

Doctors

Continued from page 6

“In my pre-med year of the program, I had made the decision to not go home for her janazah (funeral service) and it was a decision that I regretted,” she expressed.

Maryam was fearful she would fail if she missed two days of school, because at ELAM, she says, students must attend most of their in-person classes or else they couldn’t take the final. She added that experience served as a lesson, because when her father, Louis Farrakhan Jr., passed away in 2018, there was no question about if she would leave.

“I didn’t care what the repercussions were going to be,” she said. “I just had to say—I’m out, like I have to go home and just pray to Allah (God) that everything works in my favor and that I don’t have to repeat a year or fail or anything like that,” said Maryam.

She says she had only a few days to mourn her father’s sudden passing. It was a very challenging and emotional time for her. “I personally know how proud my father was for me to be studying medicine,” she said.

The discomfort of living in a different country took a toll on Ruqayyah. “[It was] a constant struggle to find something that made me comfortable,” she said. “Living overseas was just a shock for me. So it was just finding something that would allow me to just get through the day. ... I talked to my family a lot, I prayed a lot. I just really leaned on my family... I leaned on them more than usual, but they kind of upheld me and kept pushing me closer to the goal,” she said.

Even with all the trials, Ruqayyah and Maryam continued to push on.

“Despite all of the personal trials that I have gone through and I’m sure my cousin has gone through as well ... we were committed to this journey, even in times when we really didn’t want to be committed, we had people who were still surrounding us that were pushing us in times when we were weak,” Maryam explained.



Dr. Ruqayyah Farrakhan displays her diploma upon graduating.



Dr. Maryam Farrakhan displays her diploma upon graduating.

Next steps

Receiving their diplomas on July 28 of this year was a bittersweet moment for the cousins.

“[It was] emotional,” Ruqayyah described. “A little sad because our families couldn’t be there, but very fulfilling because it was the end of a journey,” she said.

Maryam said the experience was beautiful. “Graduation was just a time to reflect on the entire experience and to think about how much I had to persevere to get to this point,” she said. “I think I felt really excited for sure because I know that the future is very bright and I’m so excited to be amongst a group of very intelligent and service-driven classmates.”

‘I feel like Black people should be seen by Black doctors, because we understand—or those of us that do understand—the struggle and the plight that we deal with on the daily.’

—Dr. Ruqayyah Farrakhan

Now, Ruqayyah plans to complete the necessary exams in order to do her medical residency in the U.S. Maryam also plans to study for exams, and desires to help more Blacks and Latinos become doctors, to increase representation in the field of medicine.

To be successful, Maryam encour-

ages aspiring medical students to find a mentor. Ruqayyah advises to be prepared for struggle, build a solid support system and find constructive ways to release stress.

After coming out of school with friends from all around the world, and debt-free, Ruqayyah said studying

medicine in Cuba is a great opportunity.

“Even just during this Covid pandemic, Cuba has been sending doctors everywhere. So just to know that they stand for something and they’re principled, and even with their limitations and lack of resources, they’re still sending what they have to other nations to assist and I think that that’s very honorable,” she said.

Now that the two are looking forward to a bright future, they couldn’t be happier to start a new chapter.

“I think the notion was: survive,” said Maryam. “Now we’re to the point where it’s like alright, we survived this, now it’s time to thrive.”