

Denise Vasquez on Participants are Everything

*** Originally recorded on April 14, 2016, updated June 19, 2020. *** [Listen to it here.](#)

- DENISE VASQUEZ: 00:08 [music] Can't thank our participants enough. Our participants are everything. They are what makes Kessler Foundation what it is.
- JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:20 Welcome to our podcast series, My Life as a Research Assistant. This series is brought to you by Kessler Foundation where we are changing the lives of people with disabilities. Research assistants are on the frontlines of our research studies collecting data, conducting interviews, testing subjects, and are the face of Kessler Foundation to our research study participants. In 2020, Kessler Foundation was ranked among one of the Best Nonprofits to Work For and Best Places to Work in New Jersey. Throughout this series, we'll meet up with research assistants from our mobility, spinal cord injury, stroke, traumatic brain injury, and neuroscience and neuropsychology centers who have been with the foundation for over a year and some that are now senior research assistants, nurses, MD/MS candidates, postdocs, and those that have entered into many more professions. In this episode, I met up with Denise Vasquez, a former senior research assistant in our Center for Traumatic Brain Injury. Denise is now a registered nurse in an ICU step down unit in northern New Jersey. Welcome, Denise. It's a pleasure having you with us today.
- VASQUEZ: 01:34 Thank you.
- BANKS-SMITH: 01:35 For the type of work that you're doing here, on a day-to-day basis, what do you do?
- VASQUEZ: 01:40 Oh my goodness. Every day is so completely different. One day I can just be making recruitment calls, going through our SIMS database, seeing who might be a good participant, a good candidate for one of the studies I'm recruiting for, make calls, hopefully, get them to come in for a screening session, if not, I'm more than willing to drive over to participants' homes. Then I can spend an entire week testing. Each and every day I can be testing someone completely different. Then what I do is I don't schedule anyone for the following week, just so that I can spend the entire week scoring the data that I had from the week before. Assuming I don't have any more data to score, what I can do is I make follow-up phone calls for the Traumatic Brain Injury Model Systems that we're a part of. And my responsibility is to make [Form 2?] phone calls. And what that is is that I track people one year and two years post-injury, and it's a questionnaire completed over the phone. They get reimbursed \$25 for their time. And it's just to check to see how they're doing, how they're progressing since their discharge from Kessler. And let's see. What else do I do? Phone calls, scoring, a lot of data management. I mean, it's super important because you have to have the data ready for scientists because they use that data to submit more grants. You know what I mean? So you have to be on top of your game at all points in time. But every day is so completely different, which is what I love about this job. No two days are ever alike. And I get to choose what I want to work on. And it's just fantastic.
- BANKS-SMITH: 03:15 So what type of grants are you working on? I mean, obviously, you mentioned you work-- or collect data for the model systems. Are there any other in-house grants that you're currently working on?

Denise Vasquez on Participants are Everything

- VASQUEZ: 03:26 I'm also working on the Speed of Processing Training Study and traumatic brain injury and mild cognitive impairment. That's Dr. Nancy Chiaravalloti's study. And aside from model systems, they also have little mini-modules that are part of that. So another study that I'm working on is the Traumatic Brain Injury Quality of Life Study, and that's also phone-based. And it's conducted in the same manner that we do the model systems [Form 2?] phone calls, and we just ask people about their quality of life and see how they're doing post-injury. And throughout the years, since I've been here, since 2011, I've worked on the Memory Training Program in Traumatic Brain Injury. I've also worked on the Emotional Processing Study in TBI and MS with Dr. Lengenfelder and Dr. Genova. There's been multiple studies. I really should have a list of them written down so that I can remember off the bat, but-- oh, I've helped out-- when I initially started here, when Dr. Costa was a-- she was an intern. She wasn't even a postdoctoral fellow at that time. She had visited from Portugal. I was helping her to recruit for her study. And that was really interesting. That was my first taste of research here. And it was great because she wasn't a full-time employee, so we were kind of in the same position when we first started off. We were just sort of starting, and it was great to bond with her on that and to help her with her dissertation research. I mean, that was such a big deal. And I even got a little shout out in her dissertation, which was fantastic.
- BANKS-SMITH: 05:06 Cool.
- VASQUEZ: 05:06 Yes. Great [laughter]. When she went back to Portugal to write it up, she had asked for my information and just super thankful in that. It was fantastic working with her. So it's--
- BANKS-SMITH: 05:16 Oh, that's great. Yeah.
- VASQUEZ: 05:17 Yeah, that's a great intro. Yeah.
- BANKS-SMITH: 05:18 Yeah. Definitely. Wow. Has there ever been a research participant that stands out in your mind?
- VASQUEZ: 05:24 There's a ton. The reason why I've been here for as long as I have is because you work with such fantastic people. Aside from my coworkers and the scientists that I work with, the manager, just everyone has been great. The people that actually come in and work on this research with us, that participate, dedicate their time to us, it's amazing to see how much they want to see progress. So I work with traumatic brain injury and multiple sclerosis. And I can think of one particular participant who has MS, and she was just such a pleasure. I worked on one of the-- on the emotional processing interventions with her, so she would come in for a total of 10 times, twice a week for an hour. And mobility is an issue for her, but that never stopped her from coming in. She would come in with a great big smile on her face. And completing those interventions with her was such a joy, and that's happened on multiple occasions. But the reason I think about her all the time is because she would just always be thankful at the end of every session. She'd always say, "Denise, thank you so much. This has been such a joy, such a pleasure. Thank you so much for the work that you do." And I'm so grateful to be a part of that. I'm so grateful to be working with scientists that want to help and develop these grants. And I'm thankful that I get to be a part of that in some capacity.

Denise Vasquez on Participants are Everything

- BANKS-SMITH: 06:54 When you're working with participants, and you can see that your work is affecting people's lives.
- VASQUEZ: 07:00 And it goes so beyond-- because we do compensate our participants, but a lot of our participants are just like, "It's not about the money. It's just about the research. If my participation can help others, that's what I want." And it's fantastic.
- BANKS-SMITH: 07:20 Now, if somebody was on the fence to become a research participant, what would you recommend?
- VASQUEZ: 07:28 So what I tend to do is-- if there's someone that's on the fence, someone who's never participated in research, what I do is I give them a tour of the lab, and so both at 300 Executive Drive and over at 1199 Pleasant Valley Way, just to get them-- just so that they can see the environment. A lot of times when people think about research, they might think it has to do with medication and wires and super invasive. So when they come to the lab, and they see-- "This is our testing room," which is a nice empty room, just a table, "We're just going to work on paper and pencil tests. There's no drugs." Once we go to the scanner, and they see how spacious it is compared to other scanners-- and I can personally tell them, "I've been in the scanner multiple times. There's a lot of space. There's a lot of room. It's comfortable. If at any point you feel claustrophobic, you can absolutely come out. It's no problem. There's no consequences. So if you don't want to participate, if halfway through, you want to drop out of the study, it's totally fine. It's whatever you feel comfortable with, that's what we want to do." And a lot of times those visits help participants. It helps to change their mind. Also, another thing that helps me out is because I'm Hispanic. And whenever I want to recruit someone who is also Hispanic, I can relate to them. I can speak Spanish to them. I can better explain to them what our research is all about because it's-- in the Hispanic community, research is such an unknown thing. They don't know what it's about. When I started working here, I found it particularly difficult to tell my parents what it was that I was doing [laughter]. And even when I go to church and people ask me, "How's work? What do you do?" I still have a hard time explaining in a concise manner what it is that I do because they think research is such out of the--
- BANKS-SMITH: 09:21 Right. Yeah, it's in like test tubes and you know [laughter].
- VASQUEZ: 09:26 Yeah. Yeah. But then once I have a little bit more time to explain to them, they have a better understanding of it, so.
- BANKS-SMITH: 09:31 So you're spreading the word?
- VASQUEZ: 09:33 Yeah, pretty much [laughter].
- BANKS-SMITH: 09:36 And what's really interesting is the fact that we have our own scanner. Before, we'd have to meet people down in Newark--
- VASQUEZ: 09:44 Oh my goodness.
- BANKS-SMITH: 09:44 --use the scanner down at--
- VASQUEZ: 09:46 Those trips in Newark were intense [laughter]. We used to carry around this large box that had all of our equipment. Now, over at 1199, it's fantastic because all our

Denise Vasquez on Participants are Everything

equipment is there. It's set up. All you have to bring down is a notebook. But to go down to Newark, sometimes you couldn't even find a parking spot. You are driving around, lugging around the big box. I was in that scanner, actually. It's tiny. But now, to have this fantastic new scanner that we can call our own, it's great.

BANKS-SMITH: 10:19

Yeah, it's great. I mean, the campus, like you say, you don't have to worry about parking here. It's beautiful.

VASQUEZ: 10:23

Oh, it's bright compared to-- just very dark--

BANKS-SMITH: 10:31

Dark.

VASQUEZ: 10:31

--over at Newark [laughter]. And sometimes there are participants who would be hesitant to go over to Newark to the scanner. But now, here, it's just kind of-- it's fantastic.

BANKS-SMITH: 10:38

Oh, yeah. Fantastic. Yeah, that's great. Now, is there any parting words that you would like to share with us, anything about your job?

VASQUEZ: 10:47

I just love Kessler. And I think sometimes when I talk about how much I love my job, sometimes people may think, "Oh, she's just saying that." But in reality, I truly love what I do, and I love the people that I work with. And it's been such a blessing only because I know what the other side can be. I know what having a bad job and not liking going to work feels like. But to come here and to work with awesome coordinators, research manager, lab director, scientists, research assistants, just everyone has been so fantastic to work with. And I can't thank our participants enough. Our participants are everything. They are what makes Kessler Foundation what it is. And I'm just thankful to have this job and which is why I've been here for as long as I have [laughter].

BANKS-SMITH: 11:44

Well, I've personally worked with you, and it's always a pleasure seeing you and collaborating. And we certainly wish you the very best as you move forward in furthering your education.

VASQUEZ: 11:56

Thank you.

BANKS-SMITH: 11:59

Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded at 300 Executive Drive West Orange, New Jersey during the summer of 2016 and was edited and produced by John Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation.