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Dr. Michelle Hor's office in Colorado Springs looks like the typical physician's office. Inches-thick textbooks with polysyllabic titles fill her bookshelf, a testament to the intellectual rigor required for the job. Some half-dozen degrees hang behind her desk as proof that all those books are more than show.

But as typical as her office might seem, her journey to get there was anything but ordinary.

Hor, a 55-year-old Colorado Springs gastroenterologist, was born in Malaysia, where she faced dire poverty and grew up in a culture that discriminated against women. Despite the odds, she

learned English, became a nurse and eventually graduated from medical school, even though she didn't have a high school diploma.

She's become a role model for women in the medical profession. Two years ago she started a local chapter of Women in Medicine, a national group that acts as a mentoring and support group for women in the profession.

Children carrying coconuts

Hor was born in a remote village lush with vegetation and full of monkeys and exotic wildlife. For all the natural beauty, though, life was hardly paradise.

The youngest of a dozen children, she and her siblings started working rows of coconut palms when they were as young as 5. The work was grueling. Days began at 4 a.m. and ended late into the night. As a young girl, her job was to haul coconut shells, used for firewood, in heavy woven baskets.

The family home had an outdoor well and no running water, and everyone shared one outhouse. Virtually all the children were infested with worms. Two siblings died, a 5-year-old

sister and 1-year-old brother, of what Hor believes would have been preventable conditions with modern medical care.

Such a life, especially for a girl, was hard to escape in the traditional Malaysian-Chinese culture of the time, Hor said. Women filled their plates after the men, and girls were discouraged from finishing high school. None of her older siblings went to college.

Even so, she decided there must be more out there. “I said, ‘That’s enough. I have to get out of this place.’”

For full story and pictures, click [here](#) .