

Faith and Gen Z: Cynthia Montalvo

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Since the oldest members of Gen Z began entering adulthood in 2014, studies have shown a [pessimistic](#) generation, struggling with mental health.

Is faith the antidote? For the recent graduates of Texas Baptist colleges highlighted in this series, it seems to be.

Born between 1997 and 2012, Gen Z is nearly 70 million young people strong and more diverse than preceding generations—51 percent white, 25 percent Latino, 15 percent Black, 6 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 5 percent of 2 or more races, and 2 percent Native Alaskan or American Indian, according to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

But a [2022 Pew Research Center study](#) of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 showed one area of clear homogeneity—95 percent had access to smartphones, with almost half (46 percent) reporting they were online almost constantly.

Additionally, Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Kids Count Data Center reported 1 in 4](#) Gen Z, or Zoomers, having spent at least some of their growing up years in poverty.

[Voice of America](#) sites the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated interruptions to typical growth opportunities as an important factor in Gen Z students feeling less confident in their ability to engage in the working world.

And, compounding the stress of stepping into adulthood now, Zoomers will make up more than 17 percent of eligible voters in the 2024 general elections, with [8.3 million having turned 18 between the November 2020](#)

[and the 2022 midterm elections.](#)

Additionally, a December 2023 Intelligent.com survey found nearly 4 in 10 employers [avoid hiring recent college grads in favor of older workers.](#)

Key reasons cited by the hiring managers polled included unreasonable salary demands (47 percent), showing up to interviews dressed inappropriately (50 percent) and 53 percent were most put-off by the inability of Gen Z candidates to make eye contact during interviews.

With an eye on these statistics, and an ear to Gen Z, a series of articles highlighting the impact of faith in offsetting negative trends among recent graduates of Texas Baptist universities is underway, starting with Cynthia Montalvo, a 2023 graduate of Howard Payne University.

Montalvo is from Bossier City, La. She grew up in a Hispanic Baptist church from the time her father accepted Christ, when she was around eight years old. Her junior year, she moved to a different church, when her father became its pastor. Both her parents are originally from El Salvador.

College experience



Montalvo at graduation from HPU. (Courtesy Photo)

She heard about Howard Payne from a close friend who was attending HPU and invited her to come for a tour.

She had considered a couple of other schools, but after the tour, Montalvo ended up applying only to Howard Payne and its honors program, the Guy D. Newman Honors Academy.

Montalvo double majored in public policy through the academy, and biomedical science, with a pre-med route.

Her long-term plan is to go to medical school and become a surgeon. And, she always has wanted to be a medical missionary, she said.

In high school she was part of a leadership program that introduced students to a variety of careers through field visits. While she'd always been interested in medicine, meeting a doctor and a nurse through this program solidified she wanted medicine to be her future.

One course at Howard Payne for pre-med students required shadowing a doctor, to see if medicine was really the path they wanted to take, Montalvo said. She was chosen to shadow Jason Davis, a Howard Payne alum and orthopedic doctor in north Dallas.

She said Davis was very supportive of what she wanted to do. Coming off COVID-19 restrictions, their initial conversations were by Zoom.

“He kind of told us his story,” she said. “I think a lot of times pre-med students hear: ‘Oh, that person is a doctor. They’ve always been really smart. They’ve always had the best grades.’ And he kind of was not that. That wasn’t really his story,” Montalvo explained.

He was very encouraging, saying “look, if someone like me can do it, if it’s something you really want to do, you definitely can.”

He agreed to be shadowed by Montalvo.

Davis was a great teacher during the week she shadowed him, Montalvo said, taking extra time to explain the difference between what a good x-ray or a bad x-ray looks like, as well as making the environment fun with his laid-back personality.

Change of plans

When she took her MCAT, the entrance exam for medical school, her scores were lower than she was hoping. She chose to take a gap year or two to focus on improving those scores to make her application stronger. And she reached out to Davis to ask if she could shadow him again.

He agreed and suggested his scribe, who was heading to med school, might be willing to talk to her about what it’s like now, since he’d gone to med school so long ago.

Montalvo connected with the scribe, who let her know her job would be coming available when she moved on to med school in July.

Montalvo said she was thrilled at that prospect because any opportunity to stay in Texas versus returning to Louisiana was welcome.

“Also, in all that, just taking the time and asking the Lord if that’s really something he wanted me to do. Because even when I went to Howard Payne, that was kind of not really a possibility. My parents aren’t super rich, and it is quite expensive to go to ... a private school, or any college.

“And so, asking the Lord for guidance. Yes, is this something you want me to do? If it is, then maybe opening the doors of possibility and opportunity is something you want me to push through,” Montalvo said.



Montalvo with her parents.
(Courtesy Photo)

The family friends—a pastor family—who had opened their home to

Montalvo when she was shadowing Davis, enthusiastically agreed to let her live with them if she got the job.

Then, before she'd even had a chance to apply for the position, she heard from Davis, saying he'd heard about the scribe essentially offering Montalvo the job and thought it was a great idea. She eventually went through the application, interview and hiring process, and everything came together.

Montalvo explained God had used her time at Howard Payne to work in her spiritual life. Before college, she'd been sheltered so much, her faith had not been tested. In college, she began to struggle.

But, her faith in the Lord and dependence on him was strengthened through the ministry of her college pastor, Billy Cash, at Coggin Avenue Baptist Church. He assured her the faith she was feeling uncertain about was real and reliable. He helped her to know: "I have a personal relationship with God. It's not just that my dad is a pastor."

Faith in hard times pays off

She said at times she'd really struggled with difficult circumstances her family had faced and why they were having to go through them, but her dependence on God was strengthened in those struggles.

Cash taught her "sometimes you just need to ask for strength and depend on the Lord to take you through it, and he will. And he will guide you and he will give you strength to endure.

"And then when you come out on the other side, you've learned so much, your character has been strengthened. You're a little bit more patient. You're a little bit more kind, because you understand what it's like to go through something like that."

Montalvo said her faith has continued to grow this year as she's been responsible for making it on her own. She's continuing to learn to trust God and be obedient to his leading.

Her dad, initially, was unsupportive of her remaining in Texas. He has since come around, but she struggled when there was tension between them. Knowing that she'd asked the Lord, and he'd led her to take this job relieved a lot of anxiety.

At times, she's found it difficult to tithe, even though she was raised to know its importance, because money is tight. But she has been obedient in that and several times God has provided for her financially when she'd least expected it, when she'd needed it most, she said.

She's seen the Lord's hand this year, noting: "When you walk in obedience there is so much in your favor. And your love for the Lord grows more when you follow him out of love."

Montalvo said she is committed to pursuing med school in the future. In the meantime, she is active in Elim Church in Dallas and trusting in the Lord for continued guidance.