New SACNISTA PhD Profile: Researcher, Role Model, Advocate – Dr. Mónica I. Feliú-Mójer [1]

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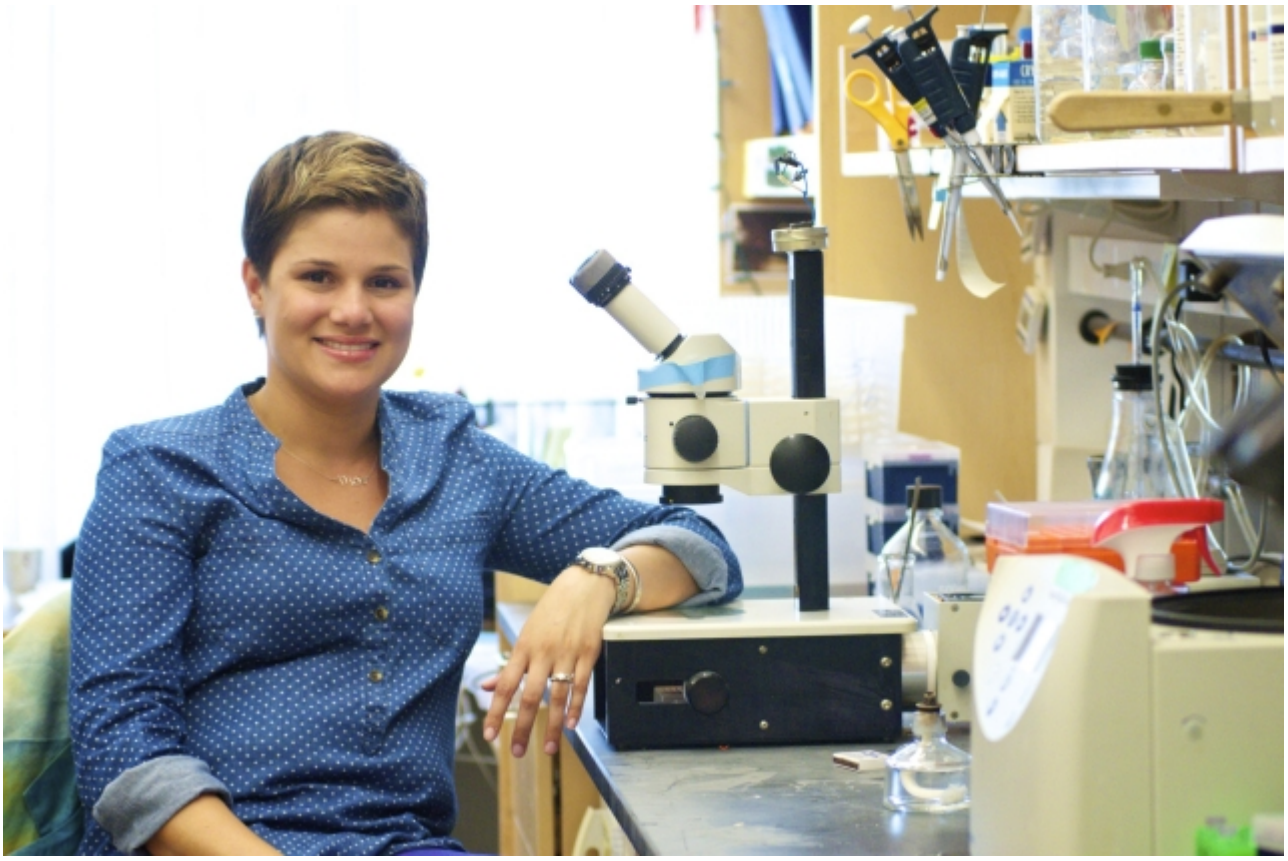

Dr. Mónica Feliú-Mójer didn’t know she could be a scientist until she was in college. Born and raised in the small town of Vega Alta in Puerto Rico, Feliú-Mójer was passionate about exploring the natural world as a girl, but her K-12 science classes did not make direct links between her local environs and the scientific concepts covered. It wasn’t until she met her first real scientist, biology professor Dr. Agnes Martínez Lahoz at the University of Puerto Rico in Bayamón, that her idea about what she could do in the world changed.

Falling in Love with Research

Recognizing Feliú-Mójer’s potential a proclivity for science, Martínez-Lahoz encouraged her to apply for a summer research program. With that simple suggestion, and the research experiences that followed, Feliú-Mójer fell in love with science and research. She soon joined the lab of Dr. Carlos Jiménez-Rivera, a neurophysiologist, which she says gave her the core scientific foundation for later research experiences.

In Dr. Jiménez-Rivera’s lab, she learned how to strategize, collect data and interpret experiments, and work independently. With these skills she first became a research assistant at Morgan Sheng’s lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and then a graduate student in Josh Kaplan’s lab at Harvard University.

Small Victories

As a graduate student, Feliú-Mójer received fellowship support from the Biotechnology Institute Minority Fellows Program, the American Psychological Association Diversity Program in Neuroscience, and the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. In January 2013, she defended her work understanding and describing the role of RAB-3, a small GTPase, in regulating the synaptic vesicle cycle and neurotransmission.

For her, graduate school was “all about small victories.” Feliú-Mójer reports that writing her thesis was challenging but very gratifying, especially when the final product was delivered. She says, “That written document embodies many years of hard work, and it represents your contribution to a greater body of scientific knowledge. In a way, your dissertation also embodies your growth as a person and a professional; the process of self-discovery that graduate school can be--and was for me at least."

Educating the Next Generation of Minority Scientists

Now armed with a PhD, Feliú-Mójer is focused on improving science education and making science relevant and relatable for minority communities. She says, "Science is ubiquitous in society, making it increasingly important for the public to become proficient in matters related to science, health, and technology."

She will continue her work as the volunteer vice-director for Ciencia Puerto Rico [4], a nonprofit, grassroots organization that promotes science outreach, education, and mentoring. CienciaPR provides an online community for over 6,300 scientists, and science-inclined students, professionals, and educators to collaborate, for professional development, and for science communication and outreach interactions.

Serving as a Role Model

For all her contributions through CienciaPR, Feliú-Mójer was recently recognized with the Coalition for the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS) award [5]. The Paul Shin Award has given her visibility on a national scale. She has used this opportunity to serve as a Latina role model, raise awareness about issues that contribute to the underrepresentation of minorities in science, and to connect with other leaders in outreach and education.

Being able to navigate multiple cultures and languages has helped Feliú-Mójer engage with colleagues and mentor students inside and outside academia. She reflects, “I have often been one of a few Puerto Ricans or Latinas in the programs and departments I have been a part of, and I am proud to share and exchange ideas, perspectives, and experiences with scientists from all over the world.”

Working to Increase Science Literacy

With her passion for science as her driving force, Feliú-Mójer is looking forward to continuing to work on the development of programs that improve access to quality education opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged and underrepresented communities; and use her leadership and expertise to improve the levels of scientific literacy and close the education achievement gaps

among minorities in STEM.

For Feliú-Mójer this is deeply personal work that is fueled by a strong desire to give back to her community, to pay it forward; and she feels a responsibility to communicate the importance and impact of science to the public that actually pays for most of the research being done. She emphasizes, "Nowadays, the public needs to be scientifically literate in order to participate in the decision-making process and to become well-rounded citizens. In addition, I believe that a solid science education is a proxy for the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, something we all need to thrive in this increasingly complex world."

About the Author

Dr. Yaihara Fortis-Santiago [6] is currently an AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellow assigned at the National Science Foundation.

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