

Dr. Belinda Pastrana-Ríos: Borinqueña Role Model ^[1]

Submitted by [Greetchen Díaz-Muñoz](#) ^[2] on 10 March 2014 - 11:00am



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Dra. Belinda Pastrana-Ríos. Photo: Carlos Díaz-Prensa RUM

Recently, she has been the topic of [many conversations](#) ^[3]. [Dr. Belinda Pastrana-Ríos](#) ^[4] is a distinguished professor from the [University Puerto Rico at Mayaguez \(UPRM\)](#) ^[5], who recently announced the establishment of a biotechnology patent for an early biomarker of pancreatic cancer.

As part of the celebrations of Women's History Month, I would like to introduce you Borinqueña to Belinda Pastrana, a woman that has fought and overcome personal and professional barriers to obtain success. Yes, we have all had difficulties in life, but I want, that through Belinda's experience, you remember that there is ALWAYS a way of overcoming difficulties and reaching your goals.

When I spoke to Belinda, she was very forthcoming about her experiences, and I identified with many of them. Like in my case, Belinda says that she was the first person in her family to obtain a doctorate. Similar to many young people that study science, her intention was to study medicine. Her plans changed when she did research as an undergraduate and her curiosity was piqued to discover more.

Belinda was born in the Bronx, New York, but obtained her bachelor's degree in Chemistry at the University of Puerto Rico at Humacao (UPRH) [6]. She obtained her master's and doctorate in chemistry and biophysics at Rutgers University [7] in New Jersey, and then did her postdoctoral work at the Mayo Clinic [8] in Minnesota. She recalls that she was pregnant with her son, who was later diagnosed with leukemia, when she was still a graduate student. For her this was not an obstacle, but rather a motivation to continue. She then returned to Puerto Rico and joined the faculty at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez. She had her second son after she joined the faculty at UPRM. During her first years in academia, her colleagues would ask: why do you put so much effort into doing research, if you could only teach? To this question she always responded: "Because I want to give back to my beloved Puerto Rico what it has invested in me". This is a sentiment with which I deeply identify, and it inspired me to be an active volunteer of CienciaPR and the desire to return the island to contribute my grain of sand. The way in which Belinda wanted to give back to Puerto Rico was by doing cutting edge scientific research in the island and by educating young people interested in continuing a career in science.

Belinda's achievements are not limited to the recently publicized patent in biotechnology. In fact, this patent is a result of more than 17 years of scientific studies [9] and encompasses how biomarker proteins are characterized for quality control during production. As a principal scientist, Belinda has obtained significant funding for her research and collaborations with other scientists in and outside the island. Her work has resulted in many scientific publications. This Borinqueña has obtained important positions in both academia and industry. In addition, she has also received many awards and distinctions in and outside of Puerto Rico. Her biggest satisfaction is to be able to use the resources, for which she has worked so much, to train future scientists. Up to date, she has trained hundreds of undergraduate students, dozens of masters and doctoral students, and postdoctoral investigators.

Belinda's advice for all Borinqueñas (and men too) that wish to pursue an academic career is to focus on obtaining funding and the necessary resources to achieve their research plans during the first five years of your career. Belinda received funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for many years. However, she tells us that the economic situation of this and many other funding agencies, as well as their politics, have changed a lot. Added to this situation is that the

administrative problems of the UPR have negatively affected the relationship with the federal funding agencies. She confesses that, like many of her colleagues, she considered relocating to the United States, and that is when she learned that the funding situation in Puerto Rico is not very different from that of other scientists in the United States and the rest of the world. Belinda regrets how the current economic crisis has diminished scientific creativity, something that is devastating for our society. She also regrets how basic science research is being considered as less important, although this kind of research is what generates the most knowledge and understanding of our world.

About young people and education, she tells us that she feels the students at UPRM have something special. For Belinda, going into the classroom and seeing the faces of the young people she will be educating is a moment that fills her with pride. Throughout her career, she has taught different courses in chemistry and has also designed new courses that have enriched the curriculum at her department. She has also created and collaborated in different educational projects.

Many women state that they have to work double, in contrast to their male colleagues, to obtain the same visibility and recognition. Belinda acknowledges she had this experience, but that by doing her work with passion and determination, she learned to overcome this disparity. She also recognizes that the support of her family and life partner has been key to her success. In Puerto Rico, the number of women researchers (that are active and obtaining funding) is not very large, but Belinda hopes that in time this will change. I have to say that these words are a perfect fit for me at time when I am evaluating my opportunities in academia. I am also certain that this will help many other women. Finally, Belinda confessed that she identifies with the nonfictional character from the movie "Secretariat" (2010). This character was a woman that tried to excel in a field dominated by men (horse racing), and despite the many obstacles she encountered, her perseverance helped her achieve her dream.

For Belinda this story exemplifies her drive for improvement and equality with her peers, something that always motivated her to do better. This Boriqueña believes that being a woman has its advantages. "Women are multitasked, we know how to establish our goals and priorities, and how to accomplish them better than anyone"-she comments.

Thank you Dr. Belinda Pastrana Ríos for those wonderful words! Happy Women's History Month to all!

Lear more about the author, [Greetchen Díaz](#) [10], by visiting her profile and you can follow her on Twitter [@GreetDíaz](#) [11]. [Reyna Martínez](#) [12] ([@remadel](#) [13]) contributed with this story.

Borinqueña emphasizes the contribution of Puerto Rican and Hispanic women in science and technology and provides a space to discuss topics of interest about the empowerment of women. In 'What's up Borinqueña?' we share a variety of experiences and perspectives from different women and men that are committed to advancing equality for women in science.

Tags:

- [women in science](#) [14]
- [que pasa borinqueña](#) [15]
- [Borinqueña](#) [16]
- [día internacional de la mujer](#) [17]
- [mujer en la ciencias](#) [18]
- [Patente](#) [19]
- [patent](#) [20]
- [UPR-RUM](#) [21]
- [Biotechnology](#) [22]
- [biotecnología](#) [23]

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