

AAAS Caribbean Division celebrates women at convention ^[1]

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The American Association for the Advancement of Science Caribbean Division dedicated its convention to the first Puerto Rican neurologist.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Caribbean Division celebrated women in science in their 39th convention. The event recognized the first Puerto Rican neurologist, Dr. Ana Judith Román García, for her career and professional legacy.

Román García is the first Puerto Rican to receive a scholarship from Harvard University without applying to specialize in electroencephalography at Massachusetts General Hospital, affiliated with the academic institution. In her remarks, during the event, the pioneer in science and medicine, who continues to see patients at the age of 94, emphasized the importance of treating the person and not just the condition. She stated, “You cannot alienate yourself from the person. You are dealing with people in the same way that (the person) is dealing with me, they are looking at me and seeing me as a person.”

Due to her great sense of responsibility with her work she articulated that, as long as God allows her, she will continue to visit municipalities offering her free clinical services at health fairs as well as sharing her scientific knowledge.

After her tribute she said: “I believe that after you study medicine, you have a duty to yourself and to the public. [...] This is not a prize, this is a duty.

Promoting equity

The convention, titled Honoring Women That Move Science, featured discussions on gender equity in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), stories of women in STEM, what it means to be pioneers in their fields, and how to be successful in male-dominated spaces.

In the first panel, where gender equity in STEM was discussed, the executive director of CienciaPR, Dr. Greetchen Díaz Muñoz, stated that “we cannot put all the effort on girls (to be successful and the next leaders) if we don't fix the system because we would have the same problem.”

Díaz Muñoz, who is the founder of the Seeds of Success program, which promotes STEM and leadership experiences among girls in grades 7-9, stressed, “This is a problem of a system that does not allow girls to be successful. It's not designed to welcome women in the sciences.”

To begin to solve this we have to know the difference between equity and equality, Díaz Muñoz pointed out. “If we don't understand that, it will be difficult to understand why women need (equity).”

From her part, Society for Scientific Advancement (SOSA) founder and professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Dr. Keriayn Smith, argued, “We need to give women what they need [...] so they can be successful.”

Smith revealed that academia is where women in science face the most harassment, so we have to ask how these hostile environments are going to be fixed. She also said that systemic changes need to occur as well as greater representation of “people who look like them”.

For his part, Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU) professor and creator of the Ciencia En Tus Manos platform, Dr. Marcos J. Ramos Benítez, commented, “I think diversity is what drives

science.” “Women have unique perspectives and should be where the decisions are being made,” he said.

Ramos Benítez, who is a principal investigator in immunology and molecular pathogenesis at PHSU and the Ponce Research Institute, said his entire research program is composed of women and he tries to “give them that space.” He stressed that it is important to explicitly recognize the contributions of women in the sciences.

When asked what advice he would give to other men to close the gender gap in the sciences, Ramos Benítez answered that they should educate themselves about the problem, recognize it in their areas of work, and then ask themselves how they can improve these situations.

For example, he added that it is important not to interrupt women when they speak because statistically they are more unnecessarily interrupted than men in work meetings.

CienciaPR highlights their projects and research

In addition to the conferences, the convention featured a poster exhibition where undergraduate and graduates students as well as professionals exhibited their scientific projects, including the organization CienciaPR.

Elvin Joel Estrada García, coordinator of educational resources programs of CienciaPR, presented the projects Científicos al Servicio and Científicos en Línea, which “seek to increase the interest of participants in science.”

Estrada García said: “This poster is very special, it is the first poster that our program has, so it represents that step of research that we want to carry out [...] and present this type of research in education, which is not one of the particular topics presented in these conventions.”

Regarding the presentation of the Semillas de Triunfo and For Girls in Science projects, the second being from L'Oreal Caribe and CienciaPR, the manager of CienciaPR's Semillas de Triunfo Programs, Dr. Liz Hernández Matías articulated, “There are programs in Puerto Rico that are going that extra mile, that platform to get more girls interested in STEM careers.”

She said: “It is an opportunity for the community to learn about what we do [...], so then we can look for those points where we can converge and work together for the same purpose. In this case, the goal of Seeds (of Success) is to bring girls closer to careers in the sciences, to provide opportunities for STEM professionals and advanced students to mentor girls. There are programs in Puerto Rico that are going that extra mile, that platform to get more girls interested in STEM careers.”

Meanwhile, Xavier Ortiz Torres, the coordinator of the Aquí Nos Cuidamos project and lead author of the book *Ciencia y Solidaridad*, who also had posters at the convention, noted, “In the academic field, the work of community leaders and their role and importance is not always valued. So, for us to be here, at the AAAS Caribbean Division convention, and to see that many of our community ambassadors are community leaders, is an achievement.”

Ortiz Torres highlighted the projects with the purpose of awakening curiosity in the academic world about what community leaders do with science by showing their work, achievements, and challenges.

The annual meeting was held on October 26, 2024.

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