

They are leading the way: women who are at the forefront of science in Puerto Rico ^[1]

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The conversation “Women Scientists and Leaders” featured Dr. Mónica Feliú, neurobiologist and science educator, and Dr. Esther A. Torres, gastroenterologist, both Women of the Year 2024. (Carlos Rivera Giusti/Staff)

Hato Rey - What do science and leadership have in common in Puerto Rico?

Without a doubt, both fields are being led by **pioneering and visionary women** who, from their respective positions, inspire new generations, demonstrating that it is possible to excel and serve the country with excellence.

This was witnessed in the second discussion of the year as part of **Magacín's** “Mujer del Año” project, which took place at the **Genesis Mall Experience**, a partner brand for the second consecutive year along with Reinhold Jewelers. Dr. **Esther A. Torres** [3] and **Monica Feliú** [4], recognized as our **Women of the Year 2024** [5], led the conversation, which also featured the special participation of renowned meteorologist **Ada Monzón**. During the meeting, which was also sponsored by V. Suárez & Company Inc. and Walmart Puerto Rico, the scientists shared their beginnings, the development of their careers, and their vision of the role of women in the fascinating world of science.

The evening began with a warm welcome by the general director of GFR Media, **Yalixa Rivera Cruz**, and **Leyra E. González Pérez**, editor of Magacín magazine and manager of the Woman of the Year project.

"We want to share with you the example and inspiration that these scientists will impart to us, who in their respective fields have managed to excel and shine before us all. **I hope this evening inspires you to dream bigger, believe in us, be more supportive, and continue building a more just and equitable future for all,**" said Rivera.

"Part of the identity of this project is that it is not just about recognition; **we want the work of these women to spread, and we do so through these discussions.** But this time we are going to change the format. Rather than sitting down to talk with them, we are going to let them introduce themselves to you and share their stories, what they have been doing, and what projects they have to share with us," González said as a prelude to the inspiring conversation that was about to begin.

It should be noted that **"Woman of the Year" celebrates extraordinary Puerto Rican women who inspire with their talent and leadership in the various fields in which they work,** recognizing their achievements and commitment, while giving them visibility with the desire to inspire future generations and become role models for other women.

"Passion for what I do, which is not work, but a vocation. Discipline to set goals and work to achieve them. Vision to recognize opportunities and flexibility for detours. Thinking that when someone says 'it can't be done,' you say 'let me see how we can do it.' Surround yourself with teachers and mentors and learn from them, and from young people who also teach and keep you agile. Know how to ask for help, but above all, always believe in yourself," explained **Torres, the first gastroenterologist in Puerto Rico, educator, and researcher,** as she reviewed her career.

Recently, the professor launched an **initiative for an easily accessible card,** through her FEAT foundation, for patients with inflammatory bowel disease.

For her part, **Feliú, a doctor of neurobiology and science communicator,** said that, contrary to what we might think, **her career as a scientist did not begin when she completed her doctorate in neurobiology at Harvard University,** but rather during her childhood in Puerto Rico.

"The truth is that over the last decade I have had the opportunity to reflect a lot on this question, and I have realized that I became a scientist long before I received my diploma. I became a scientist here in Puerto Rico, specifically in the Pachanga sector of the Maricao neighborhood in Vega Alta. **I grew up in a working-class community, surrounded by nature and community leaders who, although they did not have degrees, had knowledge about science,**" said Feliú, who is currently the director of Public Participation in Science at [Ciencia Puerto Rico](#) ^[6] (CienciaPR) and took the opportunity to present part of her documentary **"Coming Home."**

The discussion also featured blind astrophysicist and 2024 Woman of the Year, Professor [Wanda Díaz Merced](#) ^[7], who was in the audience accompanied by a group of female students who took part in the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Camp this summer at the Cayey Campus of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) for Adults with Intellectual and

Developmental Disabilities.

The third part of the discussion was the screening of a moving video showing Merced's work at the camp with the 13 young people who spent six weeks learning practical science skills from her that will also serve them in their daily lives.

"They say the door is open, but then the door is either too high, too low, too wide, or too narrow. Look, make a door that we can all pass through," said the astrophysicist in the video report.

During the discussion, the experts answered questions from the audience, contributing their knowledge to the concerns and needs of the communities.

"We need to understand what others need in order to know how to contribute. This requires talks, visits, and conversation. People have to listen and talk," added Monzón, who was recently recognized in **Forbes** magazine's **"50 Over 50"** list.

At the end of the evening, this trio of extraordinary women in science shared their vision and hopes for the future.

"It took us 20 or 30 years to get here; it may take us another 20 or 30 years to reach the next step. There are now as many women as men in medicine. **We must continue to set an example, pushing for these things to happen, helping our colleagues to smooth the way.** I believe that we can eventually get there. We never give up," Torres emphasized.

"The invitation I would extend to everyone is to think about how we can amplify our efforts. I'm sure there are scientists in the audience here; even if we are not scientists by profession, science plays a role in our lives in some way. **We can use our privileges and our voices to create those spaces and encourage more women of the year.** It is crucial that people can see these examples and know that they represent them," added Feliú.

"For my part, never lose the desire. Don't let yourself be defeated. **There will be many challenges along the way, but if you don't give up and persist in what you want, one way or another you will achieve things.** Maybe not always the way we think they will happen, but they will happen. And above all, trust in God. Sometimes we have to put ourselves in His hands and say, 'If it is right, it will happen; if it is not right, it will not happen, but here I am to serve.' And that, for me, has always been a guiding principle," Monzón concluded.

The discussion not only served as a platform to celebrate their achievements, but also as a collective call to continue paving the way for women in science.

Learn about the stories of the 10 outstanding women featured in the Woman of the Year 2024 ^[5] special.

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