

Ten Years of Planting the Future: CienciaPR Celebrates a Decade of Inspiring Girls to Pursue Scientific Careers ^[1]

Submitted on 3 December 2025 - 12:01pm

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Calificación:



No

CienciaPR Contribution:

El Nuevo Día

Original Source:

itzel.rivera@gfrmedia.com

By:



The commemorative ceremony for the Semillas de Triunfo program coincided with the opening of the “They Change the World” exhibit at the Parque de las Ciencias.

Bayamón — Amanda C. Saliceti Galarza is 15 years old and still wears a school uniform, but with a disarming confidence she affirms that she wants to “be a mechanical engineer.” She understands that “women can do any job they want,” regardless of the stereotypes and gender barriers that still persist in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

The young student was able to discover what interests her thanks to **Semillas de Triunfo**, a **Ciencia Puerto Rico (CienciaPR)** program that seeks to introduce middle and high school girls to STEM careers. This Tuesday, the program celebrated its tenth anniversary at the **Parque de las Ciencias** in Bayamón.

Each year, Semillas de Triunfo recruits 120 girls from across Puerto Rico. Over the past 10 years, it has admitted **743 girls**, of whom **690 have completed** their journey as graduates and **552 have developed STEM ambassador projects**, initiatives that have impacted more than **118,000 people** on the island, explained the project manager, **Liz Hernández Matías**.

“I’ve spent 10 years telling everyone that we need this type of curriculum, because there is still a gender gap in science, and it’s necessary to give girls the confidence that they can enter these careers. As long as that gap exists, Semillas de Triunfo will continue,” said **Dr. Greetchen Díaz Muñoz**, executive director of CienciaPR, emotionally, to *El Nuevo Día*.

According to Díaz Muñoz, the current political landscape does not encourage the support of gender-focused programs, and it has become challenging to lose allies who do not feel

“comfortable” sponsoring programs exclusively for girls. Still, there have been more partners who remain than those who leave.

Among the recent achievements, she highlighted the launch of **a second chapter in New Haven, Connecticut**, the state with the highest proportion of Puerto Ricans in the nation. This division is run in collaboration with **Yale University**, and in the first semester they managed to recruit **35 girls**.

“These types of programs there, where there are many Latinos, help break cycles of poverty. Once a girl becomes the first in her family to go to college and become a professional, doors open for everyone else at home,” she said.

During the event, the book “**Siembra tu semilla de triunfo**” (“Plant Your Seed of Triumph”) was officially presented — a 128-page text featuring educational content and exercises in STEM disciplines, as well as the experiences of **40 alumnae**, including **Josie Torres Colón, 15**, who wrote her essay about women in the field of robotics.



“I would like other girls to know that, through the program, they’ll get to meet extraordinary mentors who help you grow as a person and as a professional,” said Saliceti Galarza, who also published a drawing in the book.

“They change the world”

The tenth anniversary of Semillas de Triunfo also marked the opening of the exhibition “**Ellas cambian el mundo**” (“They Change the World”), a showcase featuring **five statues of women who are ambassadors and innovators in STEM fields**. The exhibit is part of an international collection of **120 statues** titled “**If Then She Can — The Exhibit**”, previously presented in Dallas, New York, and Washington, D.C.

In Puerto Rico’s case, the five women represented are “If Then” ambassadors and allies of Semillas de Triunfo: Puerto Ricans **Roselin Rosario-Meléndez**, PhD in Chemistry; **Minerva Cordero Braña**, PhD in Mathematics; and **Díaz Muñoz**, PhD in Microbiology, along with **Beatris Méndez Gandica** from Venezuela and **Ana María Porras** from Colombia.



Before the **COVID-19 pandemic**, when Semillas de Triunfo was at risk of disappearing, a meeting of “**If Then**” was held in Texas, where all of the ambassadors met. There, they were surprised by the organization, which awarded each of them **\$10,000** to develop initiatives that would impact girls.

“I was lucky enough to convince them to join me. We pooled the funds (\$50,000), and that’s how we saved Semillas de Triunfo. Otherwise, I don’t know how we would have continued,” said Díaz Muñoz, emotionally.

Once the official “If Then She Can” exhibitions came to an end, the organization gifted each of the **120 women** their statue. Since Méndez Gandica and María Porras could not ship theirs to their home countries, they decided to send them to **Puerto Rico**, “where they feel at home,” Díaz

Muñoz said. The statues will be displayed for six months at the **Aerospace Institute of the Parque de las Ciencias**.

Among the next steps, she added, is continuing to integrate **sign language** and girls with **functional diversity** into Semillas de Triunfo.

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