

A pilgrimage through Puerto Rican Science ^[1]

Submitted by [Francis Heber Gonzalez](#) ^[2] on 12 July 2016 - 11:21pm



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Francis share his experiences as a volunteer for CienciaPR

To be in a cold, inhospitable climate, with your colleagues telling you stories of people disappearing under the snow in winter storms makes anyone second guess his decision to leave the beaches of my homeland for the cold winters of Boston.

After moving to that inspiring and musical city, somehow I learned of an initiative called Ciencia Puerto Rico, and they had created a website. I thought: "More boricua nerds, good! What a great idea!" So I went to the site, created a profile and invited all my friends from the Chemistry Department at UPR-Mayaguez to join.

Shortly after that, a group of students from several universities in Boston, concerned about the fiscal situation in the country wanted to get together to do something for their country (remember when the government had to shut down, the first time, in 2006?). In one of those conversations one of my new friends told me about a girl who worked with CienciaPR and wrote articles for El Nuevo Día about Science.

It turns that this was Monica,^[3] who worked in the building right in front of mine. Coily but with enthusiasm I sent her an email asking her to get together for lunch one day. I remember talking that day about her mice and some articles she had recently published in El Nuevo Dia through a collaboration. She said another Puerto Rican worked in the same building and another at Brandeis. These were Paola^[4] And Yaihara.^[5] Both are deeply committed to education and moving Puerto Rico forward.

We shared many lunches, coffees, lectures, seminars and even Latin Rock concerts amongst Puerto Rican scientists in Massachusetts while we were together. The strength and inspiration that these Puerto Rican scientists, #Borinqueñas, had the sweetness to share with me during those years is something I never get tired of talking about and those beautiful memories I will take to my grave.

Eventually, I went through New Haven and Daniel^[6] took out of his time to take me to lunch at a food truck, this was when the trend was starting, and we sat for a couple of hours to talk about my plans. He gave me advice that I keep in mind when taking decisions to this day.

On my way from Boston to Los Angeles by car, I went through Michigan and met Giovanna^[7] and her husband and discussed several ideas I had in mind to help CienciaPR. Besides that I learned about another side of Giovanna, the Puerto Rican art collector, her apartment decorated by posters from festivals, paintings, and many other Puerto Rican crafts that filled me with joy and island warmth on a cold January day in Michigan.

I later went through Nebraska and I met Greetchen^[8] in Lincoln. We had coffee together and she told me about her dreams and vision. It was very inspiring. The meeting with Giovanna and Greetchen made me understand that it is true what Roy Brown sings: "I would be Puerto Rican even if I were born in the moon".

In 2012, as I contemplated a career transition, I made the commitment to join the volunteer team. Since then I have helped in various initiatives. Perhaps the most thrilling to me are the most recent ones: the blog entitled "Knowledge: To your health"^[9] (Conocimiento: A tu salud)" and this initiative to collect the stories of our volunteers to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the

organization.

I've always had a special interest in education, mentoring, science communication, and public health. The initiative of "Knowledge: To Your Health" brings all of these interests and aspirations together: to educate about public health by cultivating the science communication skills of future health care professionals through mentoring. It is a work in progress but I'm very happy with what has been accomplished so far and for the enthusiasm of everyone involved.

Thanks to the students of the Medical Sciences Campus and my colleague [Viviana](#) ^[10], a friend from the years in Boston (more than 10 years ago, how time flies!). She has been the engine of all this from the campus motivating her fellow Med School students to collaborate with writings. Similarly, this would not be possible without the other collaborators, teachers, and Puerto Rican scientists committed to Science and Puerto Rico who have contributed articles, resources, tips, and information. I only edit the articles and coordinate publication dates by sending emails. They write and are the real heroes. To all of them, my deepest gratitude.

Similarly, the project to collect the stories of volunteers is very valuable to me. For years I have seen these larger-than-life characters go through life humbly and simply while achieving marvelous things for Puerto Rican Science, both in the island and abroad. The inspiration from them is invaluable.

Like Daniel mentioned in an [earlier article](#) ^[11], quoting Mayra Santos-Febres "Our stories haven't been told yet. And without our stories, the world is incomplete". So, for me, telling these stories is essential.

There's still a lot to do for Science in Puerto Rico. I think it all starts with education from an early age, instilling curiosity, not giving answers but asking questions, letting the kids get their hands dirty, eat dirt and get bit by wasps and fire ants; letting them climb trees and bite into a lemon or a mango or tamarind to find out what they taste like. In short, let them live the scientific method.

I hope Ciencia Puerto Rico can catalyze our transition as a society from one where scientific knowledge is not only a privilege of a few but the language spoken in the street. Because science is all around us: a coconut falls from a palm tree, a coquí sings, the strings of a "cuatro" fill the mountain air in Jayuya, coffee grows in Maricao, Mosquito Bay lights up in Vieques via its bioluminescent microorganisms, and rain falls almost every day in El Yunque. There's Science behind each of these events, each as Puerto Rican as the blood that runs through our veins and the feeling we get when we see our flag playing in the wind.

Long live Puerto Rican Science! And long live the family of Ciencia Puerto Rico!

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