

Miller School Student Awarded Grant for Culturally Inclusive, Nutritious Meal Plans

For many people, eating more healthfully would be easier if it didn't mean forgoing their favorite ethnic cuisines. To support the creation of a culturally sensitive two-week meal plan that could promote healthier eating, the Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA) Medical Honor Society has awarded a \$500 grant to Michael Thomas Garcia, a rising second-year medical student at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

The AOA Take Action Grants are awarded to students in their first three years of medical school, to fund new or existing service projects for humanity in health care. Garcia perceived the grant as a way to leverage his passion for cooking and nutrition to help others.



"Our project aims to promote long-term change to patients and their families," said medical student Michael Thomas Garcia.

"When I saw the opportunity to create a community service project through the AOA Take Action grant, it seemed like a perfect chance to put into motion an idea that I was already thinking about and help others in a similar situation," Garcia said. "Learning how to cook and eat healthy is not easy, but I'm trying to reduce that barrier by creating healthier preparations of ethnic foods."

Creating a Meal Plan

To commence the project, Garcia reached out to Maddison Saalinger, a dietician at the University of Miami Diabetes Research Institute, to verify the nutritional information going into the meal plan. His next steps involved creating a

range of tasty dishes that appropriately represented a variety of South Florida's cultures. Garcia's Cuban grandparents helped him with Latin dishes, while his classmates Frantzia Jeanty and Royi Lynn contributed Haitian and Israeli recipes, respectively.



Healthy and delicious:
blackened tilapia with grilled
asparagus and wild rice

Garcia is creating booklets that contain a patient education section and a meal plan with the recipes that have been developed. His vision for the project is to distribute the booklets in primary care offices throughout Miami for physicians to hand out to their patients as needed. The booklets will also contain a survey for providers and patients, so that Garcia can learn from their feedback and continue to improve the project.

"One of the challenges I faced when the project concluded was

organizing all the recipes into a coherent cookbook," Garcia said. "It is a surprising amount of work developing recipes, and on top of medical school, it can be difficult. On the other hand, I've been able to try new cooking techniques and create amazing meals that I've shared with my friends and family."



Future plans for the project include adding dishes from more cultures and cuisines, and reaching more people by distributing the meal plan to more health care providers. Garcia wants to help change the mindset of physicians and patients trying to eat healthier.

"Michael's desire to create a difference in his community, combined with the efforts he put into producing this project, is a true testament to his determination, philanthropic nature, and ingenuity," said Oneith O. Cadiz, M.D., assistant professor of clinical pediatrics at the Miller School. "These characteristics are why I believe he will be an excellent physician."

As part of the grant, Garcia will submit a one-page final report to AOA summarizing his experience with the project.

"Eating healthy should be a lifestyle modification, not an unsustainable fad diet over the short term," Garcia said. "Our

project aims to promote long-term change to patients and their families."

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