Physical Therapy Student Receives National Minority Student Scholarship for Non-Profit Work

Jennifer Socarras Garcia, a Cuban-born spring graduate of the physical therapy doctorate program at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, was recently awarded the American Physical Therapy Association’s Minority Student Scholarship for 2022.

Neva Kirk-Sanchez, Ph.D., P.T., associate professor and chair of the Department of Physical Therapy at the Miller School, and Marlon Wong, assistant vice chair of clinical services, nominated Socarras Garcia for her academic achievements, leadership, and community service.
Jennifer Socarras Garcia (center, in red shirt) has coordinated scores of students' volunteer involvement with the Sabrina Cohen Foundation's Adaptive Beach Days.

“Jennifer fits right in with everything that the American Physical Therapy Association is looking for when awarding this scholarship,” said Dr. Kirk-Sanchez. “She is the kind of person who is really able to rally support from her classmates. She is kind and diplomatic and hard-working. When we thought about who to nominate, she was just the perfect selection.”

Socarras Garcia also received the department chair’s award, bestowed on the student who best embodies the qualities of a dedicated future physical therapist and leader.

During her childhood in Cuba, Socarras Garcia, now 26, loved to spend all the time she could in the ocean — but academic and career prospects were dim. At the age of 13, she moved with her mother to Miami, following her father’s relocation six years earlier to pave the way financially.

“Everything here was clean and organized,” she said. “There was water and paper towels. Toilets had doors. Professors were experienced, serious, and dedicated. This was so different from where I came from, and it motivated me. I understood why my parents brought me, and I had to prove their efforts would be worth it.”

A Zeal for Community Service

Serving her community here was a way of life from the start. As an undergraduate student at Florida International
University, Socarras Garcia majored in psychology, established the Physical Therapy Student Association, and continued to volunteer in initiatives including Project Downtown, Relay for Life, Walk for Multiple Sclerosis, Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, and the Miami Medical Team Foundation’s humanitarian mission trips to New Orleans and Costa Rica.

Then she saw a flyer about Adaptive Beach Days, a project sponsored by the Sabrina Cohen Foundation to provide individuals who are differently abled — those with spinal cord injuries and other neurological conditions, veterans, children with special needs, and the elderly — with beach and ocean immersion experiences.

“I went, I fell in love with it, and kept going back as a volunteer,” Socarras Garcia said. “They liked that I was consistent, dependable, and they began to give me more responsibility, including coordinating with local volunteer groups, planning the access and transfer of participants to the water, and other program-related tasks.” She currently serves as a program coordinator for this project, and has brought scores of other students into the volunteer fold from local university programs.
Socarras Garcia at graduation, with parents and Sabrina Cohen

**Volunteer Leadership**

By the time Socarras Garcia was accepted into the Miller School physical therapy program, she was introducing herself as the volunteer coordinator for Adaptive Beach Days, and her fellow students were quick to join up.

“Students have just loved it, and they come back,” Socarras Garcia said. “They're not only feeling like they're making a difference, but they're learning something potentially novel to their experience, in this recreational setting, about rehabilitation in the populations we serve.”

She says that the program balances safety and assistive measures with pure fun.
“We have music, we bring food and water, and we try to make everybody as comfortable and safe as we can,” she said. “The most exciting part is to see people who have never been in the ocean before, or haven’t since their injury or neurological condition happened, and the gratitude and joy they share with you.”

Socarras Garcia’s enthusiasm and leadership also served her program chairs. Dr. Kirk-Sanchez said that as vice president of a class of 57 physical therapy students, Socarras Garcia was a resource for conveying the class’s needs to her.

“She would be the first one to call me if she thought there was something that I needed to know or to address,” Dr. Kirk-Sanchez said. “That role was super critical during the worst of the pandemic.”

Looking Ahead

Now studying for her board exams, Socarras Garcia hopes to find a job in neurological or orthopedic physical therapy, though her overall plans are to broaden her PT base. Options abound for her, thanks to a path she says she owes to her parents’ decision to seek a better life.

“I’m really grateful to them and to this country for the opportunity to develop into who I am today,” she said.

As Dr. Kirk-Sanchez welcomed the newest class of physical therapy students, she reflected on the momentum Socarras Garcia brought to the program.

“Jennifer created the energy in our class,” Dr. Kirk-Sanchez said. “She is always exuding positivity and a ‘We're going to get through this’ attitude during the pandemic. We’re going to
miss her very much.”

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