

Having recently received my permanent residency in August 2013, I look back at the experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today: hard-working, ambitious, and willful. I came with my parents from Peru to America to escape economic hardships with the hope that their children will have all the opportunities they did not have growing up.

A major factor that played a role in my story began during my high school years where I was impacted deeply by immigration issues which limited my academic opportunities for a higher education. As a high school senior eager to attend college, I was enthralled about the opportunities that awaited me. However, my ambitions were thwarted when I found out I was undocumented. Because of my immigration status, I was unable to apply to four-year colleges or receive any financial aid for tuition. Nevertheless, the sacrifices my mom has made raising my brother and me without any help day after day, gave me the strength to continue. She is my constant source of inspiration and I wanted to show her that her hard work will pay off. Despite my setbacks, I decided to pursue the only available option, attending community college as a business major. At Union County College, I took advantage of the diverse educational opportunities that were offered. I took part in several research independent projects ranging from conducting literary research on the history of evolutionary theories to understanding the limitations of the undocumented student. My independent study on evolution has left me with a desire to learn more about the biological sciences, particularly how this knowledge can be used to contribute to society. As a means to give back to the community, I became an active member and secretary of Phi Theta Kappa where I participated in community service projects in the city of Cranford and co-hosted a Black and White Masquerade Charity Ball to raise money for Down Syndrome Research. I ended up graduating community college with honors and took the next step in continuing my education. A close friend of mine informed me about the CUNY system in New York that accepted undocumented students and I knew this was my chance to finally attend a four-year college where I can pursue a career in the sciences.

Working as a full-time deli worker for several months after community college, I was finally able to afford the tuition to attend York College. I majored in biotechnology and maintained a high GPA even while taking challenging courses in biochemistry, molecular biology, and physics. Wanting to give back to this York College, I founded the Biosciences Club, an organization aimed at informing undergraduates about career opportunities in science through faculty talks and field trips to biotechnology companies. My hard work in the classroom was recognized, when I was recruited to the Biology Department as an Adjunct Clinical Lab Technician. As a science major, I also sought research experiences that would allow me to use my skills to address critical problems in biomedicine and society. This led to me conducting a senior thesis under the supervision of Dr. Anne F. Simon where focus of this lab was to use *Drosophila melanogaster* as a model to study asocial behaviors, which are seen in autistic individuals. The goal of my project was to determine if a chemical neurotransmitter, dopamine, influences a specific type of social behavior: the social avoidance of stressed individuals. My research project allowed me to obtain grants to present my work at the Columbia Undergraduate Spring Symposium, the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students, and an annual *Drosophila* Conference hosted by the Genetic Society of America. I am also excited that my work will be published with me as one of the authors. My scholarship and research accomplishments were also recognized by the receipt of the Alliance/Merck Ciencia National Scholarship, awarded to Hispanic students with good academic standing in the STEM fields.

Wanting to further expand my research interests, I was selected for a summer internship at Princeton University to study the role of signaling molecules in deciding cell fate during developmental stages of *Drosophila melanogaster*. Having obtained research experiences in the developmental biology and behavioral field, I wanted to further prepare myself for a career in research. My college institution awarded me a study away fund to attend a Quantitative Biology Workshop at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology which helped me prepare for competitive PhD programs in the biological sciences. All these academic experiences have prepared me for doctoral studies in the sciences, something I would not have thought possible a few years ago. I graduated Magna Cum Laude from York College, received awards for academic excellence and honors in biotechnology, and a distinguished graduate award from the Alumni Association of York College. Looking back to the graduation ceremony, the most defining moment was not my awards but the smile I saw on my mother when I received my diploma. Not only have I made her proud, but I became a role model to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who felt pursuing an education seemed impossible.

While there were several challenges in my life, I overcame them with my ambition of accomplishing my goals in the biomedical sciences and the support of my mother. All of these roadblocks have made me into a stronger individual, always keeping track of what's important, academics and family. The preparation that York College gave me and my determination helped me get accepted to Yale University for a PhD program in Biochemistry, Biophysics, and Structural Biology. In this doctoral program, my dreams of pursuing a research career are coming to fruition. I will continue striving to learn more about the biomedical field and how I can give back to the society that has given me all these opportunities.