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Hispanic Heritage Month Contest

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Latinx Gators Seek Social and Environmental Justice Amid Pandemic

The current pandemic alters the course of everyday activities. Despite the challenges that online classes might present, UHD broke enrollment records, conveying a message that now more than ever, education and resiliency fuel active minds amid pandemic. This “new normal” has challenged but has not defeated the Latinx students, alumni, and faculty mentioned in this essay. Latinos at UHD remain active and lead the university, their community, and families while fostering a love for learning that upholds the resiliency that characterizes Latinx culture.

Given UHD’s current Step-2 status in the COVID-19 Response Matrix, the majority of the student body learns through online platforms. Very few students and faculty visit campus because student activities must take place virtually. This year marked the first time that Welcome Week events, all orientations, and student activities accommodated onto virtual platforms. Welcoming the student body to the university is key in student retention and engagement with the college experience. To help welcome students to this different semester, Cassandra Aparicio, director of community outreach with the Student Government Association (SGA) and criminal justice student at UHD, created the #VirtualGators hashtag. Students posted pictures wearing masks or taking online classes using this hashtag on social media platforms. The unforeseen pandemic surprised many students as well as faculty.

Fortunately, the Gator Grit that characterizes student at UHD pushed many to keep pursuing their career goals. Latinx students were not an exception. UHD students: Christina

Sterna, an environmental geoscience major, Alexay Lopez, biology major, Elwin Jaime, data analytics, and Yessenia Rincon, fine arts major, sought to learn about sustainability through the Eco-Reps Summer 2020 program. UHD's Center for Urban Agriculture and Sustainability (CUAS) offers the Eco-Reps program. It aims to expose students to sustainability efforts, social and environmental issues that prepares them for the current and future marketplace and as engaged citizens. Lisa Morano, Ph.D and director for CUAS and Juan Martinez, coordinator of sustainability, lead the Eco-Reps program. The students expressed that while the internship ended, they learned valuable skills to use both in the marketplace and communities as better-equipped citizens. These Latinx students agreed to share how this internship equipped them as better global citizens in the article titled "Eco-Reps recount CUAS internship experiences" (Zaldivar, 2020).

Sterna expressed the internship urged her forward in her career goals. She said she wanted to pursue a degree in environmental geoscience because she "wanted to learn more about how our earth functions" (Zaldivar, 2020). She said that "taking care of the earth is taking care of ourselves and future generations. That's where Eco-Reps came in. When I heard about the program, I thought it would be a great way to learn how to live more sustainably and how to talk to others about living more sustainably (Zaldivar, 2020)."

Sterna also joined Support Undergraduate Sustainable Technology and Agricultural Needs (SUSTAIN) Scholars this current fall semester. The SUSTAIN Scholars is another program by CUAS, and it is a year-long program that starts on the fall and ends with a guaranteed summer internship. Elwin Jaime, a graduate student pursuing a degree in data analytics, said he gained insight of how his academic discipline serves to help others visualize how climate change puts millions of people at stake. "Data analysis gives shape to sustainability

by providing visuals with quantitative or qualitative information. As such, we get a better understanding of how and when the people of the world become affected,” (Zaldivar, 2020).

Rincon believes people should approach sustainability and climate change issues through art. Rincon said that “art is a very powerful medium to convey the message of sustainability because it has the power to get to one’s emotion and have a connection towards it; an artwork whether it’s a photograph or painting, it speaks more than words. People are more captured and moved through art rather than factual evidence,” (Zaldivar, 2020).

Eco-Reps said the internship enhanced their college experience at UHD and encouraged them to think critically. Rincon said that learning the internship improved her college experience “by opening [her] eyes to so many problems we are facing that I would normally not pay attention or was not aware of; such as the connection of housing segregation and sustainability, to big companies spreading misinformation about climate change just for their profit benefits,” (Zaldivar, 2020). She added that it definitely encouraged her to research and fact-check everything she sees or hears. It also made her more aware of where and who she give her money to when buying clothes, groceries, or cars (Zaldivar, 2020).

Sterna said learning about sustainability encouraged her to become a more aware global citizen by helping her “question everything that we do each day to see how it impacts our local community and our global community,” (Zaldivar, 2020). She added that what “we do in our homes daily can affect people across the globe; the Eco-Reps program has broadened my mindset about how the Earth and its people all work together, for the good and bad in one unified system,” (Zaldivar, 2020).

Similarly, Alexay Lopez, a biology major said he has become a better person, critical thinker, and researcher who is “much better informed and prepared to face challenges such as

destroying misinformation and educating people on things like climate change and pollution,” (Zaldivar, 2020). Lopez’s career goal is to become a medical doctor and explore the environment’s impact on society and added that “sustainability has led me to believe it’s indeed possible to co-exist with the environment all around us” (Zaldivar, 2020).

Juan Martinez, the coordinator of sustainability at UHD Center for Urban Agriculture and Sustainability (CUAS), started working at UHD on January 12, 2020. Martinez raises awareness among the student body and community members about sustainability, green initiatives, and social justice issues through the Eco-Reps, Support Undergraduate Sustainable Technology and Agricultural Needs (SUSTAIN) Scholars, and other programs by CUAS. He agreed to an interview titled “Faculty Profile: Juan Martinez, coordinator of sustainability” where he discussed what made him pursue a degree in sustainability and share how this discipline is needed to protect people and planet from exploitation (Zaldivar, 2020).

Martinez’s favorite approach to talk about sensitive topics such as environmental injustices, is to make it personal. Martinez witnessed environmental injustices at an early age while growing up in Dimmitt, Texas. Like the other cities in the Texas Panhandle, Dimmitt’s economy is powered by the meat and dairy farms. While these farms drive the economy, the abundant concentrated animal feeding operations in the area have depleted resources in nearby communities. “There’s so many CAFOs, it’s completely depleting the resources in the area, the water especially” (Zaldivar, 2020). Martinez remembered how the many farms also impregnated a foul smell in the area of a mixture of cow manure, methane, and other greenhouse emissions. Martinez said that “there’s always a constant smell of cow manure in the area; you can smell the methane in the area; you can smell the cows from far away,” (Zaldivar, 2020). The foul smell is not only unpleasant but is also

responsible for causing people in the community to develop respiratory health conditions such as asthma from all the dust and manure particles in the air. Martinez said that community members are suffering from a social injustice issue, and that it is “spiraling effect of obviously environmental injustices all occurring because of one industry” (Zaldivar, 2020).

His most memorable environmental injustice was regularly seeing how hundreds of cattle were confined to tight pens for their whole lives without being able to roam and graze naturally. He criticizes how CAFOs take the animals natural instincts away from them. While Martinez once saw the environment in Dimmitt as normal, he credited higher education for opening his eyes and changing the way he now views his experiences growing up and certain aspects of life. Martinez obtained a bachelor’s degree in environmental sustainability from the University of Oklahoma in 2016. In May 2019, he graduated with a master’s degree in sustainability studies from Texas State University. “Higher ed[ucation] reshaped my mentality about certain aspects of life and who we are as stewards to the earth, who we are as a species, and how we are supposed to manage all these different industries that we have created,” he said.

Fortunately, Martinez has also witnessed positive change throughout the Texas Panhandle. On his way back to Dimmitt from Odessa, after completing a summer internship in 2014, Martinez noticed that many farms implemented wind turbines. He said he felt excited and intrigued to see how this change to renewable energy was implemented in the span of two months. Martinez discovered that years of research proved to farm owners that the change to renewable energy would be beneficial, feasible, and government subsidized.

As for change in Houston, he encourages everyone to take advantage of the many local farmers' markets and to consider the health and environmental benefits of reducing their intake of meat and dairy. He encourages people to “be more conscious of what you are consuming and

how it is being brought to your table; why pay for a cucumber that comes from Chile when you can produce your own in Houston, or in my hometown, or in your backyard?”

Buying food from local farmers reduces the carbon footprint attached to our food and brings back money to people in the community: local farmer, local person, someone is your neighbor; a local community member (Zaldivar, 2020).

Martinez joined UHD on January 12, 2020 and has since served as coordinator of sustainability. He said he encourages students to learn about sustainability through UHD CUAS because of how this growing academic discipline has personally equipped him for the current and future marketplace and as a more engaged citizen. The marketplace has seen a huge shift in the way people want their stuff sourced. They’re seeing a shift in the way people care about where their products are coming from and the quality of the products.”

Martinez referenced that many of the leading clothing brands are sourced from developing countries such as Bangladesh. Less strict labor laws in poor countries offer clothing companies an opportunity to profit from cheap labor. He said his degrees helped him understand that “there’s more to it. There’s more to where your shirt came from, there’s more to who made your shoes, what your shoes are made of; there’s more to everything that we have,” (Zaldivar, 2020).

Even though he has only been working at UHD since the beginning of this year, Martinez has already witnessed the impact of sustainability in the lives of UHD students. In July, Gator Green team members, Hector Melchor and Mariann Ribar, won audience gold for sustainable dorm designs in the Gulf Coast Green Conference’s Student competition. Melchor and Ribar joined the SUSTAIN Scholars program by UHD CUAS in the fall 2019 semester. Through the SUSTAIN Scholars program, Melchor and

Ribar also completed an internship with GreeNexus, a sustainable architect company in Houston. Martinez said he felt proud of the students and that this award meant he is leading students in the right direction. Similarly Rincon said that “people need to be more empowered to make better decisions for our home, their loved ones, and themselves. We need to respect ourselves and not cause any more damage and change our habits for the better,” (Zaldivar, 2020). Jaime encourages everyone to be “more environmentally and politically aware as both are intertwined! In closing, remember to value education as it is the first step in solving any problem,” (Zaldivar, 2020).

Even while graduating UHD, Gators strive to maintain culturally aware and demand social justice. Ana Treminio, UHD political science alumna and senior criminal intake clerk for Harris County, wants to be a future lawyer to help close the gaps of social inequality. In a article titled “Bad Bunny performs live concert from moving truck” she praised Bad Bunny, a music artist who has won a Latin grammy and billboard award for creating music with a “meaningful message” (Zaldivar, 2020). She said Bad Bunny tackles masculinity issues. Treminio recounted all the backlash Bad Bunny received for dressing up as a drag queen in the music video and for being seen with painted nails in real life.

She applauded the way Bad Bunny “breaks the norms” in a male-oriented genre such as reggaeton. She praised the Puerto Rican artist for amplifying the anti-femicide movement, #NiUnaMenos and for the plot in “Solo De Mi” that centered on leaving an abusive relationship.

Treminio said, “to me, he is saying what needs to be said: Women need to be respected no matter if they were born female or not...and consent is important,” (Zaldivar, 2020).

Gators from different majors, backgrounds, and pursuits in life, share a Latinx culture that pushes them to give back to their community and demand social and environmental justice.

This essay is dedicated to all their efforts and resiliency amid a pandemic. The novel coronavirus has altered the course of everyday lives, but Latinx Gators have proven their ability to adapt and emerge stronger and desire those same qualities and privileges for the rest of their communities and Earth.

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