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Honors student heads toward graduation with big goals in sight

Posted April 19, 2013 at 8:40 am by [Tom Scherberger](#)



Marco Padilla-Rodriguez

Marco Padilla-Rodriguez has known what he wanted to do since he was a teenager.

He wanted to teach.

Then he fell in love with the environment and was determined to combine his two passions.

So when he was accepted into the [Honors Program](#) at USF St. Petersburg in 2009, he enrolled in the Environmental Science Program. His goal: to be a researcher and college professor specializing in ecology.

Four years later, he has achieved one of those goals: He has published his research as a first author and published another paper as a second author. And last weekend Marco was the runner-up for the best undergraduate oral presentation at the Annual Meeting of the [Florida Branch of the American Society for Microbiology](#) in Islamorada. A third research paper is under consideration for publication.

Now, with his acceptance into the highly competitive five-year Ph.D. program at the University of Arizona, he is one step closer to achieving his second goal. His graduate work will be in Arizona's Biological and Biomedical Sciences Program. He will receive a stipend and tuition waiver to support the pursuit of his goals

He credits much of his success to the creative, collaborative environment he found at USF St. Petersburg.

"USFSP has been a good institution to foster my growth as a student," he said. "I really enjoy the small class sizes, the accessibility of faculty members and, of course, the location! St. Pete has so many beautiful areas that set it apart from other universities."

Marco worked closely with Mya Breitbart, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Biological Oceanography and postdoctoral researcher Karyna Rosario, Ph.D, at the [USF College of Marine Science](#), after learning of an undergraduate research opportunity through Thomas Smith, Ph.D., director of the USFSP Honors Program. During this time, Marco worked to characterize novel viruses in previously unrecognized hosts. He hadn't even taken a basic biology class, "making the learning curve even steeper," he recalls.

That didn't stop him.

"I was quickly developing a passion for molecular work, fostering a desire to learn about the biological mechanisms behind the procedures and molecular techniques I was employing," he says. "This semester-long program turned into an ongoing research partnership with Dr. Breitbart's lab, and shifted my desire from ecology to molecular biology."

"Of all the undergraduate students that have worked in my lab, Marco is the one that I am the most proud of," said Breitbart. "During the past two years, he has completely transformed from a 'standard' undergrad without much direction into a highly motivated, budding young scientist who I believe has a very promising future in scientific research."

Marco is a Florida native who has lived in St. Petersburg for most of his life and has traveled extensively across the country and abroad. He graduated from St. Petersburg Collegiate High School. He is a member of the university's [STREAMS](#) (Supporting Talented and Remarkable Environmental and Marine Science Students) program, which is supported by the National Science Foundation.

"Marco has really thrived at USF St. Petersburg and quickly emerged as one of the stars of the Honors Program," said Smith. "We are very proud of his accomplishments and know he is going to go far."

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Marco, soooooo proud of you, even though I had nothing to do with it! :-) Your Mom and Dad are looking down from heaven at you and saying " We did good!" Can't wait to visit you in Tucson. See you soon. Love you lots!

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wonderful!

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Thank you :)

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girl did you take any grad pics. Stadium the masses

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Inger look see what he has done. We love you Marco!

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[Lin Santoro Pitchford](#) · [Consultant, Owner](#) at [L. M. Pitchford Associates](#)

Marco.. I know your Mom has been a big inspiration for you. I am certain she knows of your strength and success. We are very, very proud of you and your goals and your incredible success at a very young age. With love, Lin Santoro Pitchford.

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thank you for those lovely words! :)

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Great Job Marco! Keep up the good work! :)

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Marco, yours is a great example of what can happen when faculty collaborate with students. Excellent job seizing the opportunity and godspeed as you travel to Arizona. Still up for a lunch before you leave if you have time.

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Marco, we follow your achievements with pride and respect.

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