From home, Francisco Mercado is studying distant galaxies

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Coronavirus is affecting everyone, and our School is no exception. This piece is one of a series of snapshots about the people of the School and how they're doing during the pandemic.

For work, Francisco Mercado spends his days thinking about stars and metals. He usually does his thinking at UCI in Frederick Reines Hall where he works during the week as a third-year graduate student in the Department of Physics and Astronomy. But when there's a pandemic, Mercado can do his work just as well at home where he lives in the Campus Village. Mercado's an astrophysicist who studies how metals distribute themselves in faraway galaxies, and since he does all his work on a computer, he can take his office home with him and work.

Coronavirus looms large in his life. The university asked students like Mercado to leave campus in the wake of the pandemic, but Mercado did not, because he could not. "They gave us the option to leave. Unfortunately, I don't have a place to go," he says. "All of the rooms at my parent's place are currently occupied."

Back where he grew up in Santa Fe Springs, his mother, Lourdes, is the manager of a middle school cafeteria. She's working overtime to prepare extra student meals, which parents come and pick up with no questions asked. "It's been really tough on

her," Mercado says. What's more is that his girlfriend, Maria, was about to get her master's degree in marriage and family therapy from Mount St. Mary's University. But that will now have to wait.

Until the pandemic passes, Mercado is managing his cabin fever by taking his dog for walks each day, and by preparing to publish a paper about galactic metals.

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