Late Ph.D. student José Flores-Velázquez honored with endowed fund at UCI

Donations from Physical Sciences dean and faculty will support grad students.
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José Flores-Velázquez poses with the command module from 1969’s Apollo 11 spacecraft — the first to land humans on the moon.

Picture Credit:

UCI

Irvine, Calif., May 11, 2022 — Before his tragic death in 2019, José Flores-Velázquez was a brilliant astrophysics Ph.D. student in the Department of Physics & Astronomy at the University of California, Irvine. In his memory, UCI professor Virginia Trimble, School of Physical Sciences dean James Bullock (who was Flores-Velázquez's advisor) and longtime school supporters John and Ruth Ann Evans have established an endowed award fund to support incoming or current astrophysics graduate students.

Bullock, who is also a professor of physics & astronomy, hopes the awards will create an enduring legacy for his former student, who studied star formation in distant galaxies.

"José was a shining light in my research group," Bullock said. "He was brilliant, quick to laugh and a true inspiration. He spent most weekends back home, with his family and giving back to his community. It broke my heart when he died – but my hope is that, through this new fund, his light can continue to shine for others."

Flores-Velázquez was born Dec. 4, 1994, in South Los Angeles, and grew up in the area near Hooper and Central avenues. He received his bachelor's degree from California State Polytechnic University Pomona, where he was a first-generation student. He came to UCI in 2018, and died the following August in a drive-by shooting in L.A. while delivering gifts for a friend's baby shower.

Flores-Velázquez received a posthumous master's degree from UCI.

Alex Gurvich, a Ph.D. student at Northwestern University who mentored Flores-Velázquez during a 10-week National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates in 2017, stepped in to finish the research that Flores-Velázquez started when they met.

"One thing that was really important to me was that there be something people could cite that said 'Flores-Velázquez et al,'" Gurvich said. "I wanted to do this."

Gurvich said Flores-Velázquez's paper, which appeared in *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* in December 2020, was more than 90 percent completed at the time of his death. The topic was a question that had long stumped astrophysicists: How fast do stars in galaxies form?

The answer that Flores-Velázquez developed lies in the light coming from a galaxy's stars. Galaxies where new stars are forming give off light at a specific wavelength. Before his paper, when astronomers spotted such light, they broadly said the galaxy had been making new stars at a constant rate for the past 100 million years. Thanks to Flores-Velázquez's work, astrophysicists now know the rate of star formation can be as short as 15 million years – a much finer-resolution timeline.

Flores-Velázquez was passionate about his heritage and committed to academic excellence. His eponymous award will ensure that his name is not forgotten and that graduate students who embody his spirit will shine well into the future. Community supporters can boost his legacy by contributing to the Flores-Velázquez endowment through this online donation form.

About the UCI's Brilliant Future campaign: Publicly launched on Oct. 4, 2019, the Brilliant Future campaign aims to raise awareness and support for UCI. By engaging 75,000 alumni and garnering $2 billion in philanthropic investment, UCI seeks to reach new heights of excellence in student success, health and wellness, research and more. The School of Physical Sciences plays a vital role in the success of the campaign. Learn more by visiting: https://brilliantfuture.uci.edu/uci-school-of-physical-sciences/.

About the University of California, Irvine: Founded in 1965, UCI is the youngest member of the prestigious Association of American Universities and is ranked among the nation's top 10 public universities by *U.S. News & World Report*. The campus has produced five Nobel laureates and is known for its academic achievement, premier research, innovation and anteater mascot. Led by Chancellor Howard Gillman, UCI has more than 36,000 students and offers 224 degree programs. It's located in one of the world's safest and most economically vibrant communities and is Orange County's second-largest employer, contributing $7 billion annually to the local economy and $8 billion statewide. For more on UCI, visit www.uci.edu.

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