Ensuring an Astrophysics Student’s Light Shines On

Astrophysics graduate student José Flores-Velázquez had a brilliant future ahead of him.

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UCI



José Flores-Velázquez posing with the command module from the 1969 Apollo 11 U.S. lunar landing — the first mission to land humans on the moon.

Picture Credit:

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Astrophysics graduate student José Flores-Velázquez had a brilliant future ahead of him. Before coming to UCI in 2018, he conducted research with faculty at Northwestern University and Harvard University. Within his first months in Irvine, he earned a prestigious National Science Foundation graduate research fellowship – a rare feat for a first-year doctoral student.

Flores-Velázquez's lifelong dream was to work at NASA. Born in South Los Angeles, he was an inquisitive child, fascinated by the starry night sky. He became the first in his family to graduate from college, paying his way through Cal Poly Pomona by working at McDonald's.

"José lit up a room like the sun," says James Bullock, professor and dean of UCI School of Physical Sciences, and Flores-Velázquez's advisor. "He was a bright light both intellectually and personally – someone who everybody liked, was always joking around, and brought joy to a lot of other students."

After Flores-Velázquez died in a drive-by shooting near his home in 2019, his friends and faculty in the School of Physical Sciences came together to ensure his legacy continues to illuminate a path for future students.

Bullock and his wife, Blake – along with other faculty and community friends including UCI Foundation Trustee John Evans and his wife, Ruth Ann – established an endowment in honor of Flores-Velázquez, which already raised $40,000. Beginning in 2023, the endowment will support an incoming astrophysics graduate student's summer research at UCI, setting them up for success.

"This fellowship will provide an opportunity for a student to come to campus a little earlier, and get their feet wet in research right away, so that they can hit the ground running when their Ph.D. program formally begins," says Bullock. "This early landing period allows time to meet their advisor, get to know the other students in the research lab, and adjust to graduate life so they are ready to succeed when their first quarter starts."

Image



James Bullock, professor and dean of UCI School of Physical Sciences, set up an endowment in honor of Flores-Velázquez with the help of his wife, Blake and other faculty and community friends. Photo: UCI/Steve Zylius

Early research experiences were a driving factor behind Flores-Velázquez's success at UCI. As an undergraduate, he had collaborated with a doctoral student to determine how fast stars form in galaxies. Together, they narrowed the generally accepted answer of 100 million years to a timeframe as short as 15 million years. Flores-Velázquez's paper was published posthumously in *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.*

In addition to his intellectual curiosity, Flores-Velázquez is remembered for his sense of humor, love of mariachi music, and dedication to family. In fact, his last act was delivering baby shower presents to a longtime friend. Throughout his academic career, Flores-Velázquez championed diversity and inclusion in science. He came through the CalBridge program, which supports students from underrepresented groups on their path to UC graduate programs, and actively participated in peer mentoring programs within the School of Physical Science.

Bullock envisions that the fellowship will support students who, like Flores-Velázquez, are committed to diverse student experiences and fostering inclusion within the scientific community.

"Many people looked up to José and saw him as a role model," says Bullock. "My hope is that this endowment will not only honor future students who reflect José's

values, but allow José to continue to be a guide star in our community.”

Donate to the José Flores-Velázquez Endowment in Astrophysics here.

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