Graduate student award honors the memory of astrophysics Ph.D. student

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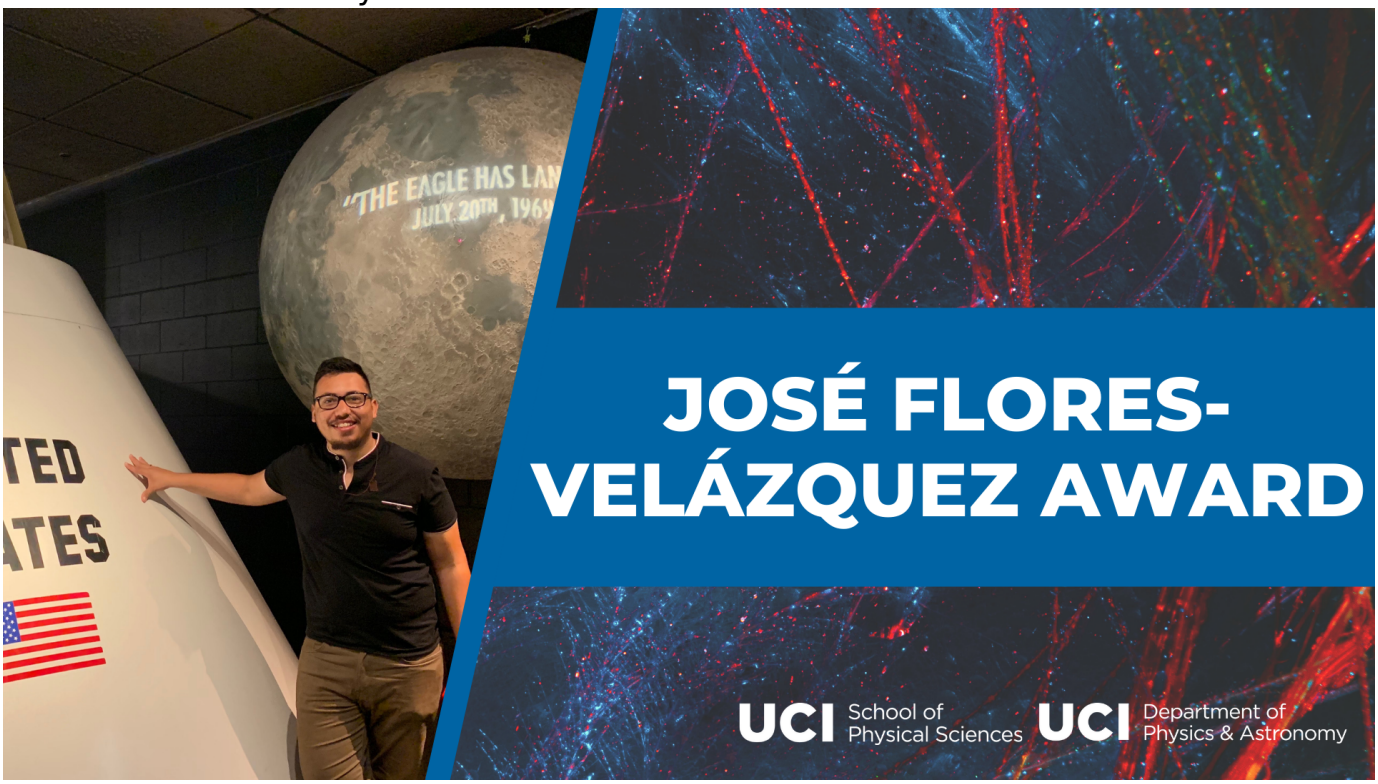

The award honors Helena Escudero’s significant contributions to the school and field of cosmology and ensures that José Flores-Velázquez’s light continues to shine bright at UCI.

José Flores-Velázquez was an astrophysics Ph.D. student at UC Irvine when he was tragically killed in 2019. In the wake of José's death, members of the Physical Sciences community established an endowment in his honor that funds an annual award for one incoming or current astrophysics graduate student.

Helena García Escudero, a third-year Ph.D. student in the UC Irvine Department of Physics and Astronomy, was selected by department faculty to be the inaugural recipient of the 2024 José Flores-Velázquez Award. Named in memory of the cherished member of the UCI community, the award recognizes the remarkable dedication, impassioned engagement and significant contributions of a current graduate student in astrophysics.

Escudero was selected because she embodies the same spirit that distinguished Flores-Velázquez – a profound passion for tackling complex problems and excelling in astrophysics, paired with a contagious positivity and engagement in her courses and research.

Watch: Helena Escudero accepts the 2024 José Flores-Velázquez Award

Escudero first came to UCI as an undergraduate exchange student from Spain in 2017. “That was one of the best years of my life, and I knew I wanted to come back,” said Escudero.

When the time came, Escudero applied for a fellowship in her home country that would allow her to study in a graduate program in the United States. “I love UCI and I am very grateful to be completing my Ph.D. here,” she said.

Escudero is at the forefront of groundbreaking research in cosmology and particle astrophysics under the mentorship of her advisor Kevork N. Abazajian, Professor of Physics & Astronomy and the Director of the UCI Center for Cosmology. She studies the expansion rate of the universe, attempting to resolve discrepancies in observations. Flores-Velázquez’s research also examined the rate of star formation in the early universe, making Escudero’s recognition all that more fitting.

“I am very honored to remember him with my work,” said Escudero. “I want to keep doing what he would have done in this department, for us to keep diving into the mysteries of the universe.”

The award honors Escudero’s significant contributions to the school and field of cosmology and ensures that José’s light continues to shine bright at UCI.

To learn more about José and honor his memory by making a gift, click **here**. Every gift will support the annual José Flores-Velázquez Award.

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