

THE DECREE

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Venezuelan Grad Discusses Tennis Title, New Job, Life Back Home

It's been a busy past month for Stephany Barbera.

A native of Barquisimeto, Venezuela, she was co-captain on a tennis team that dominated the USA South Conference and earned a berth in the NCAA Division III regional tournament. She hosted her family at her May 4th graduation. Now the business and marketing major looks forward to moving to Miami, where her first job awaits her.

The Decree interviewed Barbera following the NCAA regionals.

Q. What led you to Wesleyan in the first place?

A. As a tennis player, I made a video of me playing and posted it on YouTube with my contact information in order to be recruited by coaches from different colleges and universities in the U.S. What made me come to Wesleyan was the tennis program and the scholarship that the college offered me.

Q. What did you learn about yourself over the past four years?

A. I learned that I'm able to achieve anything I want as long as I work toward my dreams. When I first came here, my English was very limited, but with a lot of practice, I learned the language and graduated with honors.

Q. What was special about the 2019 women's tennis team?

A. I loved the diversity of the team since all the players were internationals. It was so special to see how all team members brought something different that, all together, helped us to accomplish our goals. This year, we defeated a nationally ranked team (College of New Jersey, at 26th) for the first time in the program's history.

Q. What, for you, was the most memorable moment about the past season?

A. It was definitely winning the conference, but also the amazing trip we had in Florida for spring break, when we were able to play really good DI and DII schools.

Q. What was the most memorable moment from your time at Wesleyan?

A. It's hard to choose only one. Besides winning the conference with the team, I would say it was being inducted to the National Society of Leadership and Success, and of course, graduation.

Q. You're the only graduating senior and there is only one junior on the team. Make a prediction: How will the Bishops do next year?

A. I believe the team will do great next year. They have very strong players and I'm positive that they can go even further.

Q. I'd like to turn to what's been happening in Venezuela. Describe your family's daily life.

A. There's no secret that the situation in Venezuela is difficult right now. All my family lives there. My parents own a business and my brother's in his junior year of high school. Among the challenges faced on a daily basis are finding food in supermarkets, waiting hours in line to put gas in the cars, and experiencing shortages of power (electricity). It was fortunate that they were able to come for graduation and they're still here with me.

Q. While a Wesleyan student, how and how often did you keep in touch with them. How often were you able to visit home?

A. We did video calls at least once a week, but we texted each other back and forth every day. I tried to go home every Christmas break, because I stayed in the States every summer to work.

Q. How do you follow news events there in Venezuela?

A. I search newspapers or social media on line. In Venezuela, mass media and communications are mostly controlled by the government, so we don't really have that much access to news on TV.

Q. What do you hope happens in your country?

A. I really hope we can get rid of the current government soon and start to build a new country. There have been lots of innocent people who have died. In hospitals, children die every day because there are not enough medical supplies. Our economy is very unstable, with inflation as high as anywhere on Earth. There are a lot of changes to be made,

but we need to get rid of the dictatorship we live under right now.

Q. What is that you want Americans to know about Venezuela?

A. I would love for Americans to know what actually happens in other countries, especially Venezuela. I'd like for them to follow the news and to look for ways in which they can help the people there by making donations or providing other types of aid. Americans don't know how fortunate they are compared to other countries in the world.

Q. Talk about the difficulties in living overseas during turbulent times back home.

A. It's very difficult to leave home in order to pursue your dreams. But it's even harder when you know everything that is happening in your country, especially with your family and friends still there. Constantly I feel hopeless and desperate because there's nothing much I can do from here besides letting people know about what's going on there. Sometimes I try to stay positive and it makes me feel better speaking to my family and knowing they're okay regardless of the circumstances. It hasn't been easy being far away from home during difficult times, but knowing that I'm doing my best here (which makes my family very proud) comforts me.

Q. Finish by telling us what's next for you.

A. Right now, I'll be moving to Miami. I'll be working at Marcus Evans Company, which is an international business consulting company with multiple offices all over the world. I'll be there as a sales and development executive. I start in June. I'm very excited for this new opportunity, which I believe will help me to grow in the business world. I decided to move to Florida because I have family and friends there, it is easier for my parents to fly there from home, and I'd love to live by the beach (I don't like winter, so it'll be great!).



Stephany Barbera SI photo

ASPIRE Student Endured Cancer, Hurricane to Earn College Degree

Cecilia Patino overcame two cancer diagnoses, a hurricane, and family hardship to earn a college degree through the Wilmington ASPIRE program.

On May 4, she was one of more than 100 new grads to walk across the stage at the Rocky Mount Event Center. Her parents were among family members in attendance, while others watched the proceedings over an online video link from Cordoba, Argentina.

“As I was waiting for my name to be called, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed and so blessed to be standing there,” she said. “It all felt like a puzzle finally coming together.”

A few years after she was found to have ovarian cancer, Patino was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 24. She underwent two lumpectomies within a year, interrupting her studies at a community college.

“At the time I felt as if the world was crumbling on top of me,” she recalled. “I remembered the many times during cancer

treatments when I felt horrible. I cried myself to sleep many nights, trying to figure out if it all would be worth it, or if I would die in the process. I clenched to my faith, I knew God had a plan for me, and I decided I would fight, every day, no matter how hard.”

Then, after she recovered her health, Patino experienced two new setbacks. Her mother was diagnosed with cancer, and her father underwent brain surgery and long convalescence. She took time to care for them. “This break lasted a lot longer than expected,” she said. “I was unable to commit to my education when both of my parents were battling for their life.”

Years after finishing her associate's degree and taking courses at a different four-year school, she enrolled last fall at the Wesleyan Wilmington campus. The ASPIRE program attracted her because of the accelerated classes and a schedule that allowed her to continue working. “I was happy to see that I could still finish my degree even after taking so much time off,” she said.

Soon after beginning her courses, Wilmington was hit by Hurricane Florence.

“We were without power for over two weeks,” she said. “It was uncomfortable, but I was happy I was safe.”

Though her apartment building sustained less damage than others in her neighborhood, there was a serious mold condition that forced Patino and her husband, Elias, to vacate. They lived for two months at her family's house and then found a new apartment, whose management, she said, was considerate of her situation. Besides forcing her from her apartment, the hurricane caused severe damage to a local hotel where she was a manager.

After a period of joblessness, Patino secured employment as an office assistant at a massage and acupuncture center in Wilmington. Among other duties, she schedules appointments and does filing and data entry, she said. “I'm thankful I was able to get a full-time job and resume my life.”

Able to return to the classroom, Patino was appreciative of the personal touch she experienced from the Wesleyan staff—she singled out her adviser Fabiola Kinney—and professors. “At a previous school, the professors cared about my success, but they weren't always as dedicated,” she said. “The Wesleyan professors were understanding and tried to work with me as much as possible. I always felt my professors were with me every step of the way, offering help and advice not only for my academic goals, but personal goals as well. I felt I had a strong support system, outside of my family, which is rare to find in a school. It was comforting.”

Patino graduated with degrees in psychology and organizational administration.

“My journey has had a few roadblocks on the way, but it all felt worth it when I heard my name at our graduation, followed by magna cum laude,” she said. “I'm now healthy, cancer free, and excited to see what God has in store for me.”



Cecilia Patino

Honors Students Conduct Research on Array of Subjects

Taylor-Crocker Program At Highest Enrollment

Dr. Fred Sanborn was impressed by presentations made by seniors in the Taylor-Crocker Honors Program during the past academic year.

“The projects ran a huge gamut of topics, from the creation of a business app to original cancer research,” said Dr. Sanborn, the assistant director of the program. “I was impressed by the projects this year. The final presentations were a good indication of the time and effort put in by the students and their faculty directors.”

Fifteen seniors completed an in-depth project during the year. Directed by a faculty mentor, the projects span two semesters, with the students often doing preliminary research during the preceding summer. Dr. Sanborn was acting director during spring semester, while Dr. Bill Yankosky took time for a research sabbatical.

Last year Wesleyan's honors program grew to 65 members, the most ever. “As a whole, the honors students are very impressive,” Dr. Sanborn said. “It's remarkable the effort they put into their work as well the leadership positions they tend to take on campus and beyond. What impresses me most is that the honors students just care a lot—about their education, about Wesleyan, about their communities, and about the world. They're willing to take action to improve their world, which makes me hopeful about the future.”

Last month, The Decree interviewed six of the honors students, five of whom plan to attend graduate school next year, while the sixth is launching his own business.

Beverly Anaele

Q. Describe your project.

A. My research was focused on understanding how mosquitoes respond to a natural plant extract from the American beautyberry. This is a plant endemic to the southeastern parts of the U.S. and it has chemicals in it that repel lots of insects like ticks, red fire ants, and mosquitoes. Mosquitoes are vectors

for tons of diseases like malaria and Zika, so it's important we understand how to stop this transmission. I worked with Dr. (Erica) Kosal to determine what concentrations of this plant extract would repel mosquitoes the most. We looked at their behavioral differences, including their feeding patterns. We also learned how to maintain mosquito populations in the lab, which was a pretty cool challenge on its own.

Q. What was most challenging about the project?

A. It was definitely keeping the mosquitoes alive! There was a protocol online that we followed, but most lab protocols have to be modified for the institution where you're working. It was sort of like a puzzle, each piece coming together to create a finalized list of methods that may not appear very extensive but took much research and brainstorming to develop.

Q. What did you learn about yourself?

A. It taught me how much of a determined individual I am as well as how much I value collaboration. There were many times when I would need to stay in the lab for several hours preparing experimental trials, and I'm proud that I was able to work as hard as I did. I also could not have finalized my project without valuable help from my director, Dr. Kosal, and several other faculty members and students. This project showed me that “teamwork really does make the dream work” (not to be philosophical, but it's true), and that lifelong friends can be made through sharing your passions with each other.

Q. Be more specific about your director's role.

A. Dr. Kosal played a huge role in this project. She started working on this thesis with me during the end of my sophomore year, taking time out of her day to brainstorm ideas with me, analyze results, and gather my data. It was because of a trip I took with her Conservation Biology class that I learned the American beautyberry existed. We both sort of looked at each other when we found out that it has repellency factors and I could see the same spark of excitement in her eyes that I knew were reflected in mine. She helped me organize my thoughts for the project's objectives and my written/oral report, connected me

with conferences, and even contacted a nearby university to help me get even more input from a professor working on mosquitoes. Dr. Kosal was one of the biggest motivators I had in this thesis. She's someone I can call a close friend.

Q. What are your plans for next year and the future?

A. I plan to attend Thomas Jefferson University to obtain my Master's in Public Health degree. I hope to use this to continue researching infectious diseases like malaria and to start a nonprofit and/or go into medicine for underserved areas.

Jessica Brabble

Q. Describe your project.

A. My honors thesis is a student role-playing game based on the “Reacting to the Past” pedagogy. This pedagogy puts students into an important historical moment and assigns them historical roles to play. In my case, I based my game upon the 1898-1899 Senate debate about whether to ratify the Treaty of Paris after the Spanish-American War. This was a divisive topic in 1898-1899 because it meant deciding whether America would become an imperial power and take over the Philippine Islands.

Q. What was most challenging about the project?

A. For me, the most challenging part was staying on task. For this project, I had to create a game book, role sheets for 17 characters, an introductory paper, and some other key elements. In total, it ended up being over 250 pages of content. It was certainly a lot to keep in mind, and I had to remain disciplined enough to make sure that I had as many elements as possible ready by the beginning of March so that I could then play test my game.

Q. What did you learn about yourself?

A. I did this project while working two jobs, doing my senior seminar for history, applying for graduate school, and balancing all of my other classes. Because of that, I've learned that as long as I have a planner, I can manage my time pretty well.

Q. What role did your director play?

A. Dr. (Jonathan) Sarris was extremely helpful throughout this process. He's the one that introduced me (and my classmates)

to the concept of Reacting to the Past, so he helped me find a lot of the sources that I needed to get this project started. He was also great at answering my off-the-wall, late night emails. I owe him and my other committee members, Dr. (Chad) Ross and Dr. (Molly) Wyatt, a lot for not only helping me with the project, but with guiding me through the graduate school process as well.

Q. What are your plans for next year and the future?

A. In the fall, I will be attending Virginia Tech in pursuit of an MA in history with a public history certificate. While there, I plan to continue working on the Reacting to the Past game that I have created with the hopes of making it a more polished game that can be played at other colleges. In the future, I hope to gain my Ph.D. in history and work either in higher education or in the public history field.

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At the May 4 commencement, Beverly Anaele (right) received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award and Jessica Brabble earned the President's Cup.

Photo courtesy of J. Brabble