Life

Guest speakers and students gather to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month



Dr. Stephany Santos posing on a bench with a 'I Am A Biomedical Engineer' prompt. Santos received a PhD in Biomedical Engineering at the University of Connecticut.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UCONN COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING ON FACEBOOK.

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Students and faculty members learned about and celebrated Hispanic heritage at the University of Connecticut's Vergnano Institute for Impact's (VII) Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month event in Susan V. Herbst Hall on Monday, Oct. 5.

While audience members enjoyed yellow rice, plantains and other Hispanic dishes, four guest speakers shared their Hispanic perspectives and experiences.

VII is a sector of the College of Engineering dedicated to fostering passion and connection for engineering and STEM students. They offer programs designed to facilitate retention, recruitment, outreach and the success of engineering and STEM communities at UConn.

Durga Nyame, the college's director of Undergraduate STEM Student Success, gave background on Hispanic Heritage Month. The month has been celebrated in the United States since 1968 and occurs between Sept. 15 and Oct. 15, she said.

Nyame also said Hispanic Heritage Month is a symbolic time in the U.S.

"The main purpose of this celebration is to recognize the essential role of Hispanic and Latinx communities," Nyame said. "They play a big role on building and growing the U.S., and they continue to make a positive impact in every sector of society within the U.S."

The first speaker, Stephany Santos, gave a speech about her perspective on Hispanic culture. Santos is the executive director of VII and an assistant biomedical engineering professor-in-residence, and she is of Dominican descent.

To begin her speech, Santos asked the audience what first comes to mind when they hear the word "Hispanic." Responses ranged from tradition to diversity. Santos said the first word that comes to her mind is "joy."

"Whether it's celebrating someone's quinceañera, a birthday, a wedding or something else; there's always joy," Santos said. "Even if there aren't things to be joyful about, we still find ways to honor, we still find ways to bring joy and we still find ways to smile."

Santos shared childhood stories. She said her parents are from the Dominican Republic and they moved to Middletown, Connecticut, before she was born. She mentioned that her parents brought their house from the Dominican Republic to Middletown. In other words, they preserved their physical heritage while moving to the U.S.

The next speaker was Jorge Paricio, who works as the co-director of the Krenicki Arts and Engineering Institute and an associate industrial design professor-in-residence. Paricio is Spanish.

In his speech, Paricio said being Hispanic is different in Spain than Latin America because of its geographical location. He also said he experienced culture shock when he first moved to New York City. Despite this, Paricio eventually became accustomed to the country after meeting Puerto Ricans and trying Hispanic foods like salsa.

Another thing Paricio mentioned was teaching Spanish to his children after they were born. He said this was important because it preserves Hispanic culture.

Génesis Quiles-Galarza, who was born in Puerto Rico and raised in the states, presented next. She is an associate chemical and biomolecular engineering professor-in-residence.

A key part of her speech was about her experience being one of few Latina students in college classes. She said if another Latinx student was in her class, they'd become her main competitor for job opportunities and internships.

"When you don't see many people who look like you in positions of leadership, you start to think that opportunities for people like you must be limited," Quiles-Galarza said. "So, when I saw another Latinx in the room, I thought there was only ever enough room for one of us."

Quiles-Galarza said this represents the scarcity mindset, a belief that there's a limited number of positions, opportunities and resources available for minorities of similar backgrounds. She said the scarcity mindset is dangerous because it creates tension and strained relationships.

The last guest speaker was John Toribio, the CEO and co-founder of Zemi Labs and an adjunct entrepreneurship professor. Toribio is of Dominican heritage.

Toribio addressed his childhood and experience in growing up in the Bronx, a borough of New York City.

He said he went to school in a predominately Hispanic neighborhood, and because of that, he didn't experience any racism. However, when he moved to a new city between his sophomore and junior years of high school, he began experiencing racism at his new, predominately white school. He said it took him a year to make new friends.

Toribio also discussed his work at Zemi Labs. He said he and Hugo Posada-Quintero, an assistant biomedical engineering professor, are working to develop biomedical devices to improve detection of pain, cognitive performance, hydration status, fatigue and other health issues.

At the event's conclusion, a question-and-answer session was held. Afterwards, the guest speakers and audience members participated in three Hispanic dances: bachata, merengue and salsa. The energy was lively and vigorous.



The Vergnano Institute for Impact's presentation celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month. Speakers and students joined together for a night of dancing, fun, and advice.

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SUBOG Weekly Events:

October 5th - October 11th

SUBOG x USG Q&A - 10.6 @ 6 pm in the Student Union Theater

Sunset Fest - 10.8 @ 6:30 pm on the SU Mall

Any questions? Email subog@uconn.edu and check out @subogatuconn on Instagram for updates on our events!