

LA(B)TINO: An Interview with Professor Victor Batista

by Leticia Moedano

Prof. Victor S. Batista shares the origin of his interest in chemistry and cites determination as key to understanding and success in the field.

How has growing up as a Latino shaped the person you are today?

I grew up in Argentina and I was partially unaware I was a Latino! I always thought I was simply an Argentinean. It was only when I came to the U.S.A. that I learned that people made serious distinctions among ethnic groups. That was contrary to my life experience in a different society where people were simply classified by nationalities. My condition as a Latino immigrant brought me closer to Latin Americans and other underrepresented groups with common values, and also common concerns. It has been a very enjoyable experience.

How did you become interested in the field of chemistry?

I still remember when my first Chemistry teacher in High School (Cartasso) mixed two clear liquids and made solid crystals! I still remember that catastrophic event, with the precipitate solid rapidly falling to the bottom of the test tube. She later filtered the precipitate and we were all convinced it was like sand, like tiny little rocks. (Not like a gel or a very dense and viscous liquid). That was an amazing experiment to me. I had always thought making rocks would require high pressure for millions of years. How could matter behave like that? Could that be the way rocks were made? Could it be that a similar mixing process, although more complicated, would make life and eventually wood? Could it be that analogous mixing processes could make matter think and wonder about itself? So many questions I had! Many of them I still have. And at about that time something else happened. A classmate of mine (Fabian Kane) suggested I should watch "Cosmos: A Personal Voyage." He knew I did not have a TV at home but he was willing to lend me a small portable one he had (of course, black and white). With that wonderful television series by Carl Sagan I initiated my own personal voyage in search of understanding. Later, when I expressed an interest for science I was strongly supported by my parents (both engineers), who always showed high respect for chemists, doctors and scientists in general. One of my sisters (Liliana, who is a Biochemist) also influenced me very much. Liliana, and my mother, helped me to understand how to balance acid-base and redox reactions for the first time, and I later found out I was one of the few students in my high school class who actually understood Chemistry. Later, when I expressed interest in pursuing a scientific career, Liliana also advised me to enroll in Chemistry at the School of Exact and Natural Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA).



What attracted you to Yale?

I was attracted to Yale by the reputation of my colleagues, the Chemistry faculty, and the possibility to work with bright students. In particular, John Tully had always been an inspiring figure for me and Bill Jorgensen had a very impressive research program in computational chemistry at Yale. It was also quite evident, during my job interview, that excellence in science and the recruitment of members of underrepresented groups in the physical sciences were high priorities at Yale.

What do you like most about your job?

What I enjoy the most about my job is the intellectual freedom offered by the academic environment, and the possibility of exploring new ideas that might transform the way we think and way we live. As an example, think about our research program in catalysis for green renewable energy, the energy crisis, and our responsibility for the environment.

What do you like to do during your spare time?

I have a few hobbies. I jog a few times a week (my jogging partner is Pat Loria, a good friend and colleague; we have been jogging twice a week for seven years already!). I work out at the gym on a regular basis. You should see how many people from the Chemistry Department work out at the Payne Whitney Gymnasium every week! I have a house in a beautiful neighborhood in Spring Glenn where I share my life with my girlfriend (Lea Santos). I enjoy growing plants and flowers during the spring, and also raking the leaves when it is cold and crisp during the weekends of autumn. I enjoy music, I play piano, and I love Tango—although I have not danced in a while. I also enjoy cooking, a legacy of Chemistry. Most chemists are good cooks!

What advice do you have for Latino students interested in a career in chemistry?

A career in Chemistry would be a wonderful journey, and at a particularly suitable time for Latinos and other members of underrepresented groups in the Physical Sciences in the U.S.A. It will give you moments of discovery that will make you appreciate the world at a profound level. However, it will require lots of hard work and sustained dedication over many years. Owing to the very nature of the process of learning, you will always need determination, vision and belief in yourself. Never give up since that will be the moment when you will gain understanding, when the dust will settle, and your path will clear.

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