

Lorena Ramos

Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholar Class of 2009

Majored in Biology at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, CA

Attending dental school at the University of Southern California

What sounds like a nightmare to some was a blessing for Lorena. She spent her formative years at the dentist's office. After school and on days off she would do homework while her mother, a Mexican-born immigrant, managed the office.

In high school, Lorena became the office's receptionist. And, within a few years, Lorena was holding suction and watching the real work of drilling, filling and fixing up close.

People coming into the office might be missing half their teeth or have teeth that were badly decayed and discolored. Afterwards, Lorena said, "You see them smiling this huge smile and showing off their brand new teeth that just complement them so well."

Lorena also enjoyed seeing the patient and doctor relationship blossom. "It was a much more intimate relationship than just like 'you're my doctor.' They became friends."

Lorena learned about the Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholars program and applied. She was excited to be chosen as a scholar. "Knowing that I had the extra financial support helped make my decision to go to a private school, to go to the school that I wanted, easier." She wouldn't be burdened by loans and could let her interests, rather than finances, dictate her choices. "It made my summers much more productive."

For her summer internship, Lorena was chosen to participate in the University of Nevada's Las Vegas Research Experience for Undergraduates Program in Environmental Biology. One of her projects there involved studying bacteria from a hot spring. The focus was to investigate the properties of the spring's water to see what compounds might be responsible for causing the bacteria growth. After filtering the water and testing some of the compound in the residue, Lorena was able to narrow down the elements in the compound to a small subset.

Aside from growing as a scientist, the experience helped Lorena to feel more independent. "That was the first time I was away from home for more than a week," she said. While she enjoyed parts of the lab work, she was less enthusiastic about grant writing, publishing papers and all of the "hoops" that researchers had to jump through.

Her internship gave her the clarity to know that dentistry was the field that she wanted. "I'm never going to wonder, *what if*," she said.

Lorena sometimes finds her workload demanding, but knowing that her siblings did not have the chance to reach their own potential allows her to stay focused on her work. "I'm not going to settle for working at a grocery store or an office job, I want more than that."

She is excited about finishing dental school and getting her degree. "I don't care if people say dentist, I'm a doctor," she says. The title is a sign of her hard work and one more thing keeping her motivated. "Just being able to say 'yes,' I've accomplished that."