

Rosa Mejia
Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholar Class of 2009
Majored in biology at Hunter College, New York, NY
Research assistant and lab technician at Hunter College

Rosa came to the U.S. with her mother when she was 10 years old. In Colombia, where she grew up, she had never seen a firefly, but in Elizabeth, New Jersey, they shimmered in the dark, lighting up her aunt's backyard. She would catch them and open them up to see what made them glow. She never imagined her interest in nature would later define her career.

In high school, Rosa spent her days in school and her nights helping her mother do cleaning work.

Rosa knew she did not have legal papers. She saw college as a pipe dream. A lot of undocumented immigrants often "set their own walls," said Rosa, avoiding any situation where they might be asked about their status. Rosa followed this unspoken code, lowering her own expectations for her future.

When she heard about the Alliance/Merck scholarship, Rosa said she thought: "No, they're not going to be interested in me." Rosa had never really challenged herself in school because her mother didn't know the grading system; one letter meant the same as another. But one day, something clicked. "I think I'm kind of smart," Rosa said. So, she applied to the Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholars program and was awarded a scholarship. She was thrilled. She finally had the financial support she badly needed.

Rosa was accepted at Hunter College and chose biology as her major. For one of her summer internships, Rosa worked at a wet lab at Hunter College where she grew interested in genetics and genetic regulation. One of her first projects was culturing mouse embryonic stem cells that expressed a yellow fluorescent protein, "which I guess reminded me of my fireflies," she said, "even though the proteins are very different."

Rosa loved extracting DNA. "Ethanol precipitation. It blows my mind every time. You see this little string floating around. That's DNA!! That's what excites me."

Throughout her experience at Hunter, Rosa often questioned her abilities as a student and a scientist but she said, "I gained confidence and knowledge that was unique to me."

Rosa is inspired by the women in her family, her mother as well as her sister. Rosa's sister immigrated to the U.S. earlier than the rest of the family and because she spoke English, became the de facto head-of-household when she was only 18. Rosa is grateful for the role her older sister played in raising her.

Rosa works at Hunter College as a research assistant and lab technician in the same lab where she interned. She is also applying to graduate programs. Her long-term goals are to earn her PhD, enable her mother to quit her job and to help mentor other students.