

Vamos at Georgian Court

By Pat Johnson

Georgian Court University's Latinx students are invited to join the "Vamos" program. In Vamos they receive dedicated support from Georgian Court University (GCU) faculty and staff. They learn in a "cohort approach" which means they learn with a group of Latinx peers who take planned courses designed to help them meet their goals. They also are invited to twelve workshops offered through Avanzando, a program created by UnidosUS. These workshops give them the tools and support to graduate.

Vamos students can apply for and receive \$1,000 scholarships for tuition and college costs for up to 4 years, but the

best part of Vamos is the sense of community Latinx students achieve through attending one class a week together for their first year.

Dr. Jaime Rivera Flores, Academic and Student Affairs Director of Latinx Initiatives at Georgian Court, started Vamos after GCU President Joseph Marbach decided that GCU needed to serve the Latinx community based on demographic trends. "It took a few years before something was put together by a task force that I was not a part of," said Rivera Flores. "In 2020, I was asked to direct the Avanzando program, for which a grant was being requested. So I started from scratch



Vamos attending Unidos 2023 Conference.
Photo Credit: Dr. Jaime Rivera Flores.

Vamos continued...

and designed the Vamos program. Only GCU has it.”

The full Vamos initiative was launched in 2022, with 21 students in the Fall of 2022, said Rivera Flores. Sixteen students remained in the program during the Spring 2023 semester. “This 2023-2024 year will be the first time that we will do mentorships and the plan is that each Vamos participant will indeed get one Vamos mentor who completed the program the previous year.

“Students who participate in the program have expressed how the program and the sense of community that comes from it, has allowed them to feel more supported. They push one another to complete homework and to do well in class,” said Rivera Flores. “Many Avanzando/Vamos participants have continued to participate in other extracurricular activities related to the Latinx community such as the Latin American Student Organization, taking leadership positions.”

Georgian Court University students Linda Vargas and Gabrielle Madera were chosen to attend an Unidos US Conference in Chicago in July. Both students are honor students at Georgian Court—Vargas is studying social work and psychology while Madera is in Georgian Court’s nursing program.

Both credit Vamos for their current academic success. Vargas from Toms River said she chose Georgian Court University after reading about the school’s core values of respect, integrity, justice, compassion and service. “I fell in love with the school.”

Vargas received the invitation to join Vamos after being accepted into GCU. “We had Freshmen classes with Dr. Rivera every Friday and every other Friday we would meet and go to lunch together, then go to the chapel and break into discussion groups. I formed great relationships. As a first-generation student, the first in my family to enter college, it was important to have the ability to talk with others who might have the same problem with classes. We could be there for one another and encourage one another. We would give updates on how we were doing and how we were feeling.”

Many first-generation students drop out of school their first year because of the pressures of college life, she noted. Vamos was the glue that held her at GCU.

Vargas said attending the Unidos US Conference was a life-changing event.

“The workshops and the speakers were inspiring. It was about bringing change to the Latino community. Very empowering. We had the opportunity to network. Many government leaders were there –Vice-President Kamala Harris spoke! It was big, very big. We learned a lot about leadership. Dr. Rivera suggested we come up with ideas to improve the Latino community in our area and I am thinking of starting classes for undocumented persons to get their license since that is now legal. A lot don’t know the process, and we could help them prepare for their driving tests. We’ve talked to Georgian Court [administration] about offering an evening class since most people work during the day and I hope it will happen.”

Both Vargas and Madera will serve as Vamos mentors to the first year Latinx freshman.

Madera was already accepted at Georgian Court when she received an email from Dr. Rivera



Vamos students.
Photo credit: Dr. Jaime Rivera Flores.

inviting her to join Vamos. She said when she first arrived at the University, she was overwhelmed. “I’m a quiet person and I felt lost at first. Vamos gave me a sense of community. Dr. Rivera and my classmates –we could all relate to each other and we could share our experiences whether good or bad. It’s a community that is loving, caring and genuine.”

Vamos continued....

Dr. Rivera also gave the class tools and meditations to use when they are in stressful situations.

At the Chicago conference, the overall theme was “Change Makers” said Madera. “The workshops were on food insecurity, housing, crime, immigration—issues important to the Latino community. The workshops were very empowering. One person can think about these things but when you get a whole group of people on the same issue, all the thoughts come together and can make for change.”

Madara chose nursing as a career because she wants to help people. “It’s a passion of mine—being there for people, helping people. It’s a career where I get to do that everyday.”

During the summer, Madera worked in the kitchen at Hackensack Meridian Hospital in Brick preparing and delivering patients’ food. She might be the only Spanish-speaking employee during her shift, she said and so she made herself available to her co-workers if they had a Spanish-speaking patient. “They’d say, ‘Hey, Gabbie, go talk to this person.’”

Being alone in a hospital, frightening enough on its own, can be compounded by not being able to communicate. Hearing of these patients Madera would go and sit and talk with them. “Not everyone would care to do that but I want to help.”

“Established in 2015 through UnidosUS, the nation’s largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization, Avanzando (Advancement) Through College was created to provide support to affiliates serving Latinx college students. Through this culturally relevant college retention program, students spend a year participating in meetings focused on topics such as study skills, public speaking, and relationship-building with their peers, professors, and advisors.”

According to Dr. Rivera Flores, “The annual Conference is an opportunity for Latinx people from all over the US to get together and exchange information and ideas on how to improve the conditions of the Latinx community in the US.

The Conference brings together activists, entrepreneurs, NGOs, and government officials so they can discuss the topics that most affect the Latinx community. Some presenters of note at this conference were Secretary Xavier Becerra and Vice President Kamala Harris, among many local and national congressmen and women, senators, and personalities.”

Both students and Dr. Rivera believe this Conference is a great opportunity for Latinx people to come together and share experiences and information. Last year, one student, Andrea Garza, was funded to attend the conference in San Antonio along with Dr. Rivera Flores. First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden spoke at that conference among many prominent Latinx personalities.



2023

Sponsor online and see a free classic film now at www.jewishoceancounty.org/filmfestival.

Jewish Federation of Ocean County Annual Film Festival

This program is made possible in part by a grant administered by the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission from funds granted by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

Sunday, October 29 • 1:00pm	Monday, October 30 • Thursday, November 2	Sunday, November 5 • 1:00pm	Monday, November 6 • Thursday, November 9
Our (Almost Completely True) Story MARQUEE THEATER - ROUTE 37 TOWNE CENTER	Concerned Citizen VIRTUAL	Converts MARQUEE THEATER - ROUTE 37 TOWNE CENTER	Israeli Shorts Collection VIRTUAL
OUR (almost completely true) STORY	CONCERNED CITIZEN	CONVERTS The journey of becoming Jewish	ISRAELI SHORTS COLLECTION

MOVIES ARE \$12 IN ADVANCE OR \$13 AT THE DOOR. FULL FILM PACKAGE IS \$60.

Sunday, November 12 • 1:00pm	Thursday, November 16 • 7:30pm	Sunday, November 19 • 1:00pm
June Zero MARQUEE THEATER - ROUTE 37 TOWNE CENTER	Anne VIRTUAL AND SEA WITH WRITER ADI ESHMAN AND DIRECTOR DORIS KATVA	Hummus Full Trailer MARQUEE THEATER - ROUTE 37 TOWNE CENTER
JUNE ZERO A FILM BY JAKE PALTRON	ANNE	HUMMUS FULL TRAILER

Visit www.jewishoceancounty.org/filmfestival and catch a free classic film: **THE MAD ADVENTURE OF RABBI JACOB**

ESSEX ARTS

NEW JERSEY STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS