

National Organization  of Professional Hispanic
Natural Resources Conservation Service Employees

La Voz

Newsletter

August 2011

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President's Message

Angel Figueroa, President



Dear NOPHNRCSSE Members,

We've had a couple of eventful months and I want to bring closure to a few events. First, we had our National Conference via telephone in June. We swore in those new officials that called in that Saturday morning. We do welcome our new officers Roney Gutierrez, Jorge Camacho, Carmen Ortiz, Rick Luna, and those re-elected as Carolyn King. We did conduct the business of the organization and ended on a very strong note, proving our resolve to conduct our business even when the budget did not allow a face-to-face conference. Thanks to those who called into the teleconference paid for by our organization.

We also thank those officers that rotated out, such as Kris Graham-Chavez, Mari Hrebik, and Rosabeth Sais. Their contributions made us a better organization this year.

Right now we turn into the future and would like to take the opportunities that are afforded to us to help increase Hispanic representation in NRCS. Folks like Jacqueline Padron are helping us recruit Hispanics, and we need to increase our efforts to recruit students and new employees. We learned recently, that when there are programs like the Business Leaders Training Program that recruit new employees, we need to do better recruitment to increase Hispanic representation.

I started a new job as Director of the Pacific Islands Area, and will serve you from Hawaii. Be safe.



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2011 NOPHNCSE Scholarship Winners

Amanda Hasemeier, Scholarship and Endowment Fund Committee Vice-Chairperson

One of the big events at every NOPHNCSE annual training conference is the presentation of the scholarship winners that NOPHNCSE supports. Every year, deciding on the winners is a difficult task, but based on an essay, letters of recommendation, grade point average, and the subject of study, the committee members rank the applications and choose the winners. This year, a hard-working committee chose five winners. Even though there wasn't a meeting this year, each winning applicant will receive \$1,000, to be granted in the fall semester after receiving a record of registration that they are enrolled full-time in their university. This year, the membership is meeting the winners by means of *La Voz*.

NOPHNCSE could not continue to disseminate scholarships were it not for the generosity and dedication to the Scholarship and Endowment Fund by NOPHNCSE members and the National Council. Every year, during the annual conference, there is an auction dedicated to helping students with scholarships and financial and travel expenses to attend the conference and meet NOPHNCSE members. The students also learn about NRCS, about opportunities in the conservation and environmental world, and even have success of being hired to work for NRCS by one of the State Conservationists the student may encounter during the NOPHNCSE training conference.



Jacob Dieguez

Jacob Dieguez comes from a line of soil conservationists. His participation with an Envirothon team increased his knowledge about environmental science, soils, forestry, and wildlife and was great preparation for being a civil engineering tech during a summer working for Maryland NRCS. Jacob is getting ready to begin his senior year at the University of Maryland, A. James Clark School of Engineering, and choosing civil engineering because of his experience with NRCS. He would like to work for NRCS in the future, but he writes in his application that he "wants to do something with my knowledge and career that reaches beyond my everyday life...I desire to make a difference both locally and...to help my neighbors both at home and abroad to protect our natural resources."



Shelby Vega

Shelby Vega is a recent high school graduate from Marion, Texas, starting her university experience at Texas A & M this coming Fall, planning to study wildlife and fisheries sciences. She writes in her personal statement that “she’s happiest in jeans mucking out a stable, checking out the frogs and turtles living in the creek area by our house, or turning over rocks by the ocean shore seeing what might be living underneath.

Arcata, CA, has the privilege of being selected for the 2011 Martha Guerra-Arteaga scholarship. This scholarship honors Martha, who was the NRCS Public Affairs Specialist for Texas, and this year’s recipient shows qualities, interests and accomplishments scoring her to be one of the top winners of this year’s scholarship. Leandra developed an interest in landscape and natural resources while taking a course in Natural Resources Planning. She writes, “I aspire to change the ever-growing disconnect with our food system which is central to many larger issues including soils and water degradation, declining health, and loss of local economies... to plan for and renovate existing communities with emphasis on community agriculture, open space, and sustainable land use. Environmental planning is vital to the integrity of a healthy community and an ecologically sound environment.” An internship working as the co-director of the Arcata Educational Farm, a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has helped form her ideas. The farm trains students, shareholders, interns and other volunteers “to be future farmers and to work with the community bringing sustainable agriculture into practice.” Leandra has also been named the Educational Coordinator of the farm for this year’s internship, with the responsibility of organizing this year’s program, it’s goals and student volunteers. Leandra is preparing to finish her undergraduate education at Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA.

Leandra Lopez,
from



Leandra Lopez



Krystal Montemayor

Kystal Montemayor is being awarded the Ray T. Margo Scholarship for 2011. The Ray T. Margo Scholarship is awarded to a student from the Southwest of the United States, majoring in agriculture or range science. After a rough beginning as a student and spending a few years working, gaining life experience, and overcoming adverse circumstances, Krystal is back in school, now a successful student majoring in Agricultural Sciences in her junior year of study at Texas A & M in Kingsville, TX. She writes that she aspires to be an NRCS Soil Conservationist because through her studies and experience, she sees the work being done by the agency and how she's drawn to the NRCS mission of "helping people help the land."



Shane McNamara

Shane McNamara is from a multi-cultural family, attending the University of Connecticut, majoring in Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, especially interested in sustainable agriculture and organic farming. He's been an NRCS intern for two summers and was introduced to NOPHNRCSE by an employee while working with the agency. He's had the opportunity to do some extensive traveling, from the southern portions of South America in Argentina to many spectacular places in the United States, to the Arctic regions of the globe with an organization called Students on Ice. These experiences and other opportunities for learning, "have crafted the person I have become."

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NOPHNRCSE Latina Highlight

Cori Calvert, Recruitment and Career Development Committee Chairperson

Irma Hernández, Program Specialist for the Conservation Stewardship Program- National Headquarters, Washington D.C.

In an effort to encourage recruitment, retention, development and advancement of Hispanic women in NOPHNRCSE as well as NRCS, the Recruitment and Career Development Committee as part of their Women's Issues subcommittee will be highlighting a female NOPHNRCSE member in each issue of La Voz. If you would like to recommend a NOPHNRCSE member to be

highlighted in the next issue, feel free to email the Recruitment and Career Development Committee Chair (cori.calvert@ca.usda.gov) with your recommendation.



Irma started her career with NRCS in September of 2000. Her first exposure to NRCS was as a graduate student volunteering in Puerto Rico's San German Service Center for an ecology class project. The project involved the restoration of an area of town that was exhibiting soil erosion and threatening a nearby river. During the summer of 2000 she was invited to Washington, DC to attend a NOPHNRCSE conference to present a poster on the restoration project. During the conference she learned more about NRCS and had an opportunity to become familiar with NOPHNRCSE from agency personnel who helped her to understand the agency mission and vision. During the conference that year she received several job offers and accepted an offer made by the State Conservationist of New Jersey.

Irma moved to the States shortly thereafter, starting her career as a natural resource specialist in Freehold, NJ. Since then she has served NRCS in several different positions including soil conservationist, resource conservationist, CSP, WRP, and GRP Program Manager, as well as a few collateral duties, including HEPM and business tools specialist. In addition, Irma accepted two details which gave her the opportunity to expand her technical knowledge by exposing her to resource problems in other parts of the country. This helped her build her confidence level, and expand her knowledge related to the agency policy making processes. In September of 2008 she accepted her current position working at the National level on the Conservation Stewardship Program.

Irma's favorite thing about working with NRCS is that she feels very passionate about the work we do as an agency and believes in our mission and vision of "Helping People Help the Land". She says, "We protect our natural resources, which is our legacy for future generations to come". Irma has a lot of favorite NOPHNRCSE moments. For her, NOPHNRCSE is her family, and she enjoys every moment of it. Through NOPHNRCSE Irma has had the opportunity to learn from great individuals that share the same concerns, beliefs, and motivations.

For all new members and/or new NRCS employees Irma says: "Life is all about challenges. We are all capable of doing great things and succeeding in whatever we dream about. When we work hard for something and we overcome challenges we will treasure these accomplishments. It takes hard work, dedication, passion, and commitment to reach our goals. There is nothing impossible when we believe in ourselves and are willing to accept challenges. Don't give up or be intimidated. There are great opportunities knocking at your door everyday and sometimes we let them pass for the wrong reasons. If you accept these challenges, you will be amazed by what you are capable of doing and how much you will enjoy knowing that you achieved your goals. Learn from everyone around you, absorb what you admire from others and avoid what you know will not help you succeed. You are the image of this agency, you are the image of NOPHNRCSE, and you are the image that new generations will follow. Be proud of who you are and what you have become while remaining simple and grounded. Accept challenges and look for mentors that can guide you to achieve your goals. No matter what your aspirations are, they are all equally important and deserve recognition. Always remember-The sky is the limit and you can take your career as far as you want to".

Irma's favorite things to do during her free time are spend time with her family, water sports, running, traveling/site seeing, shopping, and anything that gets her out of the routine. At some point Irma would like to visit the Mediterranean, Hawaii, and Costa Rica. Irma is very satisfied with her professional and personal achievements. She is always open for opportunities especially if it will help her grow and strengthen her family. She is currently enjoying the blessings that she has received.

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To Ethiopia ... and Back

Tamara Buitenwerf, Soil Conservationist, Elkader, Iowa

In May 2010 my husband, Ryan, and I travelled to Ethiopia to bring home our adopted son. We spent most of our time in the capital city but ventured six hours south to meet Judah's birth mom. To say it was an eye opening experience is an understatement. The following tells you about our decision to go back to Ethiopia to reach out to the people there.

From my journal on March 9th:

Since coming home 10 months ago, I continue to think about the poverty-stricken families and conservation issues in rural Southern Ethiopia. Most of the families live on less than \$1 per day. When left as widows, the situation often becomes desperate. My desire to get involved in teaching them sustainable practices came to fruition when I connected with Friends of Orphans and Vulnerable Children



(www.fovc.org). FOVC is a grassroots organization dedicated to educating and supporting orphans, vulnerable children, and widows in Ethiopia and empowers them to break the cycle of poverty and hunger as they offer them hope and independence for the future... In addition to FOVC's other areas of service, they have a specific program called Hope for Widows... Because of my education, career, international experience, and interest, I have been

asked by FOVC to head up their crops portion of the Hope for Widows Project. To date, this is the only part of the project they have not been able to get off the ground. Additionally, they've asked Ryan to take part in their livestock for widows portion as a practicing veterinarian and someone who's worked in veterinary medicine in rural Mongolia. We're caring for the orphans and widows while using our gifts and talents. Now isn't this a seed worth sowing?



Less than 12 weeks later we boarded a plane for Ethiopia. In those weeks, I spent my evenings learning about Ethiopia climate and farming practices, which I'd previously only experienced through the camera lens as we drove down the road. I arrived in Ethiopia on a team of 13. While our team was focused on six different projects, I prepared to teach them about composting (improves organic matter, is a source of nutrients and retains soil moisture), drip irrigation, and urban gardening. Fortunately, I expected that none of that might happen while I instead learned the ropes of FOVC, built relationships with the agriculture government and farmers, and determined the actual need. I accomplished the latter. Though I could be upset that I never met the widows I went to train, I accomplished more than I could have imagined by investing in relationships. I learned that there are local experts in agronomy, crop development, food security, crop production and more. I also learned that there is a farmer training center right in the town of Shanto where we were. I was also able to spend a few hours with my husband treating livestock and educating community members. In this land of subsistence farmers who grow livestock, row crops, coffee, banana and eucalyptus trees, there's much work to be done with nutrient management, conservation, and water quality.



I have new images engraved on my mind. The faces of people I've come to love. Of a people who lean over an open ditch and scoop up chocolate-colored water from the recent two-inch rain and drink it like there's no tomorrow. People who desire to improve the orphans diets are learning that feeding four proteins a week is better than two nutrient-poor meals a day. Images of how a little bit of sacrifice on our part can be life changing for someone.

When I go back in November, I'll have a better idea of how to approach the crops program. I'll have those established relationships. I'll be taking a hand-level, more soil tests, and other tools that will fit in a suitcase and pass through customs. I'll be taking my heart, and my desire to make a little impact in the world around me. Having just spent ten days in Ethiopia, I could share story after story of lives changed.

Giving hope to people in need is worth every penny, every day of vacation and every freezing cold shower. I can't wait to go back. Oh, and an extra measure of fun to share: we were only 20 minutes drive from Judah's birth mom. We were able to connect with her again and meet Judah's biological brothers. Isn't that cool!?!? If you have questions or comments, please email me at tamara.buitenwerf@ia.usda.gov.

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BMLP – An Internship Like No Other

By Librado Salinas

Mention the word "intern" to any group of office employees and most will emphatically tell you that an intern is really a "gofer" that does little more than copy and collate documents. Of course, the prevailing joke is that most gofers spend all their time doing the tasks no one else in the office wants to do. That mindset may be true for some internship programs because we all know that "everyone has to start somewhere." However, the "gofer" mentality and jokes do not apply to the Business Management Leaders Program (BMLP) that was launched by the NRCS last January.

I was blessed to land an internship position in the BMLP. After starting in the BMLP, I learned that over 9,100 people applied for the program and 400 of us were interviewed by several three-member interview panels throughout the country.

The BMLP selection process was highly competitive and 102 individuals with diverse academic backgrounds and work experience were selected to participate in the program. I was indeed fortunate to be a part of the first 34 participants that started in Dallas in January. Thirty-nine others started in Portland in March and 29 BMLP interns started in Greensboro, N.C. in late April.

What is the BMLP?

The BMLP is an intensive and immersive two-year internship-type program. The program provides the interns with a structured program complete with carefully monitored work and intentional learning goals to obtain first-hand knowledge about the inner-workings of the agency from the ground up.

That unique combination of acquiring substantive work experience is a critical component of the program. NRCS launched the BMLP to bring together a corps of experts in the areas of financial management, human resources and contracts to help with succession planning in the face of a looming federal retirement wave.

During our rotations at different state offices, we work alongside experienced staff members to gain unparalleled experience in our chosen field and contribute our talents and energies to NRCS's mission.

Consequently, each of us is provided with practical on-the-job experience, training, and exposure to the business aspects of NRCS's operations in financial management, human resources and contracting. The training entails a combination of recurring classroom training in Dallas and rotational cross training assignments in the field at up to seven different locations during the two-year internship.

What's My Background?

I'm a seasoned, results-oriented, professional with strong credentials in all aspects of operations management, financial management, and federal government contracting and acquisition. I have prior federal government service and have also worked in the private sector.

Why did I apply for BMLP?

I applied for the Business Management Leaders Program because I thought that once I completed the training that I would obtain through the BMLP, working for NRCS would be an achievement and a rare opportunity to use my skills and expertise to help grow NRCS.

Now that I have a few rotational assignments under my belt in the BMLP program, I'm absolutely convinced that applying for the BMLP was the right choice and that NRCS is the right agency.

What is my specialization in the BMLP?

I have a BBA in Accounting, an MBA, and I'm a Certified Public Accountant. I was hired as an accountant and my specialization will be in the financial management side of the house for NRCS. Additionally, I also have a contracting background and I'm confident that additional experience will help me make more of a contribution as I progress through my career in NRCS.

BMLP and Me – What's Next?

The constant variety and periodic rotation of job functions available through the BMLP is a great opportunity to receive a comprehensive overview of what makes NRCS tick. As I near the halfway point in my internship with the BMLP, I'm convinced the program represents a win-win proposition.

We benefit from the day-to-day "real world" business experience and guidance provided by the trusted professionals within the agency that are experts in their vocation. Also, a natural consequence of the training is that we're already being acclimated with the agency's culture, work style and the business processes. This will make for a smoother and faster transition when we complete the program.

Conversely, NRCS benefits from the cultivation of new talent, increased retention, improved succession planning and fast track development of its future leaders. How's that for a Win-Win proposition?

The extensive training and the hands-on experience that I obtain with each BMLP rotational assignment are assets that I can take with me into the future. Thanks to the NRCS BMLP internship program, I will be better prepared to take advantage of career advancement opportunities that will allow me to contribute to the agency's mission of helping people help the land.

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