

The Linda Gonzales Award for Outstanding Rural Youth - 2009

- from Puerto Rico Conference program

APRIL is proud to present this year's Linda Gonzales Award for Outstanding Rural Youth to Maria Victoria Luna Velez, better known as Vicky Luna, a young woman who recently graduated from the Ricardo Palma University, located in Lima, Peru, with a specialty in molecular biology, human genetics and cancer studies.

Though there is no word in Spanish for "advocacy," Vicky has been able to get her point across as she helped change the attitudes of her university professors and others through success regarding her school work as well as her drive to improve the lives of other students with disabilities. During her years on campus Vicky advocated, as a student born with spina bifida who uses a wheelchair, for better campus accessibility – especially in restrooms and general access to buildings. Other achievements include getting involved in local and international projects including APRIL's youth pre-conferences and Steering Committee. With her leadership skills and cheerful personality, she always strives to make a difference in improving lives of people with disabilities worldwide.

Vicky is a driven and passionate advocate for justice, especially for people with physical disabilities. "The example of many people around me, during my whole life," Vicky says, "guided me to where I am now and to where I want to be in the future." Vicky grew up in a household of 8 people including immediate and extended family. She says, "Living with so many people in my house provided me with a very diverse education, coming from many sources. My mother for example, never stopped me from dreaming and going after my dreams. Although she never stopped worrying, she knew that the best way to learn was by taking risks and learning from my mistakes." Vicky says she is a perfectionist, partly because, "my father told me that no matter what I am in life it has to be the best I can be." She also explains part of her success is "because of Dr. Glen White, a smart, funny, great guy with a beautiful family and a strong feeling for advocacy. Without his support and wise advising I wouldn't have discovered how much difference I can make."

Having known Vicky and her family since she was 12 years old and seeing her blossom from a little girl into a successful young advocate, Glen says, "Vicky will be a wonderful representative of the spirit of Linda Gonzales and her tenacity to make the world a better place for people with disabilities."

CONGRATULATIONS, VICKY!!!