

Marcus W. Viles Community Growth Scholarship

Community, to me, is everything. It is the support system that lifts you up when the path ahead feels uncertain, the people who see your potential even before you do, and the spaces that remind you that you are never alone. As a first-generation, immigrant student, community has been my foundation; one that has shaped my character, driven my ambitions, and empowered me to give back with purpose and heart.

I was born in Spain, raised with deep Cuban roots, and later moved to Miami; a vibrant melting pot where cultures blend and diversity thrives. Moving to the United States was not easy, but it was Miami's inclusivity that welcomed me, and in turn, taught me the value of belonging. That early experience of being embraced, understood, and celebrated in all my identities laid the groundwork for how I now view and nurture the communities around me. The kindness I received during that difficult transition inspired me to one day become that source of comfort and familiarity for others.

At the University of Florida, I found a second home within the First-Generation Leadership Program (FGLP). I will never forget the moment I got my acceptance email. At the time, I didn't fully grasp what I had joined; I just knew it was for students like me, those navigating college as the first in their families. But little did I know, this program would change my life. Through FGLP, I found more than just academic resources, I found family. I found mentors and friends who helped me realize I wasn't alone, and I discovered my own potential in ways I never imagined.

That experience inspired me to give back. I ran for and was elected as the Head of Public Relations for the 2024–2025 FGLP cohort. In that role, I managed our social media platforms, engaging an audience of over 2,000 through original graphics, photography, and storytelling that reflected our shared first-gen experience. I helped foster connections with other organizations, created custom merchandise to strengthen group identity, and most importantly, became a mentor to over 50 students. With my fellow executive board members, we built a warm, welcoming space where every first-gen student could feel seen, celebrated, and supported.

My commitment to community doesn't stop there. I've also served as a mentor in the Member Leadership Program, guiding two first-generation freshmen throughout the spring semester. I offered them not only resources and advice but a consistent presence, someone they could rely on. And because I understand how isolating that first year of college can be, I make it a personal mission to reach out to every student from my high school who gets into UF. Each message I send might seem small, but for a student who's scared and unsure, that kind of outreach can mean the world.

Giving back has also extended to my professional life. I currently work as a Substitute Teacher at the UF Early Childhood Collaboratory, creating meaningful learning experiences for children from infancy to age five. In this role, I strive to build a nurturing and inclusive

environment that values every child's unique identity and background. It's deeply fulfilling to serve as a role model to children during such formative years, and to know that I'm contributing to the kind of community that once embraced me.

My identity as a first-generation student, an immigrant, and a woman of Hispanic descent is essential to everything I do. These experiences have shown me the importance of representation, empathy, and advocacy. I've seen how economic disparities and social inequities disproportionately affect marginalized groups, especially in healthcare. That's why I'm pursuing a Bachelor's in Health Education and Behavior on the Pre-PA track. My goal is to become a Physician Assistant who not only treats patients but truly understands them; their stories, their backgrounds, their fears. Diversity in healthcare is not just about inclusion; it's about providing culturally competent care that leads to better outcomes and more compassionate support.

Growing up in Spain, I saw how accessible, community-based healthcare contributed to the well-being of everyone. Moving to the U.S., I quickly noticed the contrast, how economic status and zip code can determine the quality of care a person receives. That realization motivates me to work harder and eventually serve as an empathetic and effective healthcare provider. I want to be the kind of PA who doesn't just see a patient's symptoms, but sees the whole person. Someone who understands that a warm smile, a respectful conversation, or a few words in their native language can make all the difference.

In recent months, my family has begun to face financial uncertainties, and while I'm incredibly grateful to be a recipient of the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars Program, I don't know what the future holds for my aid package. Applying to this scholarship is more than a financial necessity, it's a lifeline. It would bring much needed stability during this uncertain time and allow me to focus on what matters most: continuing to serve my community and preparing for a career where I can make a meaningful difference.

To support myself during college, I began working as a Substitute Teacher earlier this year at the University of Florida Early Childhood Collaboratory. Beyond just helping financially, this role has allowed me to become part of a teaching community where I can positively shape young children's early learning experiences. It's a privilege to contribute to their development, knowing they are the future we're all working toward. Each day in the classroom reminds me why nurturing, inclusive environments matter, because they plant the seeds for brighter tomorrows.

Community, to me, is the reason I've been able to dream bigger than my circumstances. Every moment of growth in my life has been rooted in the love and support of those who believed in me, even when I struggled to believe in myself. It's given me hope, purpose, and the courage to keep moving forward.

In honoring the legacy of Marcus Viles, whose life was dedicated to helping others and building strong communities, I hope to carry that torch forward. Through every mentorship I

offer, every child I teach, and every patient I one day serve, I will continue to uplift others, fueled by the same warmth, generosity, and visionary spirit that Marcus embodied. Because to me, community isn't just where I come from, it's who I am.