TURNING POINT

Marching for facts

Valerie Aquino is one of three lead organizers of the first annual worldwide March for Science on Earth Day, 22 April. Born in the Philippines, she immigrated to the United States as a child and is a PhD candidate at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Aquino combines archaeological excavations of ancient Mayan sites with palaeoclimate reconstructions to understand how humans and the environment interact over time. She discusses why it's time to stand up for science.

What spawned the idea of the March for Science?
It sprang up after the huge success of the Women's March, held around the world the day after President Trump's inauguration. Two people took a lead. Jonathan Berman, a postdoc in physiology at the University of Texas in San Antonio, bought the MarchforScience.com URL. Caroline Weinberg, a science writer based in New York City, used Twitter to connect everyone who was talking about this. A Facebook group was born and within 12 hours it had 55,000 members. Across all social-media platforms we have over 1.6 million followers.

How did you get involved?
I was one of the volunteers that Caroline and Jon brought in to oversee the Facebook public page. They invited me to be a third organizer and to help craft our mission, identity, principles and goal statements. I took a lead on partnering with scientific organizations and helping to plan events at the march in collaboration with the Earth Day Network.

Some say we should address policy on racial diversity, gender equality or immigration. Inclusion and diversity in science are core to our principles. People with diverse backgrounds, perspectives and abilities are integrated at all levels of leadership in the March for Science national committees. Discrimination holds back scientific advances, and we’re committed to talking to our peers about these topics, even when it’s uncomfortable.

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Others fear the march will politicize science.
We’ve heard that the march could harm the science community more than help it. But science is not divorced from politics. Scientists are human beings. We’ve made sure to include a diversity of people and opinions, and synthesized those opinions into a clear message — specifically, the need to defend scientific integrity and protect the scientific enterprise — on our web page and social-media outlets. We’ve secured support from more than 160 scholarly scientific and academic organizations.

How do you think joining this group will affect your career?
Scientists typically don’t stick their necks out politically, for fear of losing research funding or being branded in a certain way, so I had to weigh professional risks against my ethical concerns. And that was something I sat on — but not for very long. It’s so important right now to speak out.

Has the march affected your PhD timeline?
My PhD programme might be a little delayed. But it’s worth it. It’s crucial to make this cause as successful as it can be. I barely have time to sleep and eat. But I don’t mind. It’s galvanizing.

Will this experience take you on a new career path?
Absolutely. Before this, I was on a path to become an academic at a leading university, managing my own research projects. Now, I’ve pivoted 180 degrees. I feel that I can connect different communities and improve science-communication efforts. The march itself is an isolated event, but we have a long-term vision and are planning post-march actions. Mainly, we’ll focus on scientific education and cultivating scientific curiosity and enquiry.

What would make a successful march for you?
I hope we see a huge turnout around the world and that non-violent marchers prove inspiring. So far, more than 470 cities worldwide have organized satellite marches. I also want us to influence policymaking. This is a marathon and a relay race all in one.

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN
This interview has been edited for length and clarity.