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## Sacha L. Prashad

Sacha L. Prashad's parents came to the United States to seek better lives for themselves. Their courage taught their only daughter to follow her dreams and to prize education.

Prashad's mother spent her childhood in foster homes in Bangkok, Thailand. Her father worked nights to fund his education in Guyana, South America. Both eventually immigrated to the United States, graduated from college, and earned M.B.A. degrees. "Because my parents raised me to respect education as a priceless asset, I realize that I am very fortunate to be in a position to further my education by participating in cutting-edge research," says Prashad, 22. "I want other students to have the same chances that I have had."

Prashad began working as a mentor for disadvantaged children when she was in middle school. By the time she was 16, she was spending time each week teaching classes in underserved communities in her hometown of Los Angeles, promoting education and speaking out against drug abuse and teen pregnancy. "Looking back, I realize that working with these children led to a love of teaching that has continued growing ever since," she says. "These kids are dropping out of school, but it's not due to a lack of potential. Their life situations cause problems for them. You just need to guide them in the right direction, and that's not something I ever want to walk away from."

As a first-year graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, Prashad has continued that work by helping minority students at UCLA find laboratories to work in early in their college education. She is also working toward designing a program to encourage minority students to participate in biomedical research. "As I follow the path toward becoming a scientist, I hope to bring science directly into the classrooms and lives of minority students, especially the underprivileged students in the L.A. Basin," she says.

Her interest in science originally blossomed because of her volunteer work. While doing a community service project at a local hospital, Prashad decided that she might like to become a doctor. But those plans soon changed when she began to work in a research lab in college.

Prashad's first research experience came during a sophomore year honors research course at UCLA. She was handpicked from that class to join Hanna Mikkola's lab, where she studied stem cell development in the human placenta. During her two-and-one-half years in Mikkola's lab, Prashad

studied how the human placenta supports the production of hematopoietic stem cells, which can give rise to all the different types of blood cells. Her studies showed that hematopoietic stem cells are generated in blood vessels in the placenta. She also discovered that the placenta is a critical site for the maturation of red blood cells.

In the summer of 2008, Prashad went to Children's Hospital Boston and Harvard University to study the development of red blood cells in zebrafish as a student in the lab of HHMI investigator Leonard Zon. "I loved UCLA and the lab I was in, but I wasn't sure if I could feel the same excitement somewhere else," says Prashad, who was in Boston as part of HHMI's Exceptional Research Opportunities Program (EXROP). "Working at Harvard made me realize that it was the science that excited me, not just the lab or the people."

Her EXROP experience also helped her decide to stick with stem cell research, which she will study as a graduate student at UCLA. Prashad is also planning to continue mentoring students. "It is an exciting time in science, with biomedical advances being made every day," she says. "I hope that exposing students to laboratories early on in their education will spark flames of interest that will carry them into future careers in science."