**A Scholarship, a Sisterhood: MFOS and the Power of Friendship**

Written By: Dayana Martinez, Gina Colon, and Jazmin Pineiro

In the heart of the MFOS community, so many extraordinary stories unfold, showcasing the unbreakable power of unity and the profound connections that can emerge from shared experiences. At the center of this narrative are three remarkable women, each on her own unique academic journey, yet bound together by a lasting bond of sisterhood that exemplifies the very essence of what it means to be part of this vibrant community.

Meet Dayana Martinez, a 4th-year Health Science Major, minoring in Spanish, from the sunny shores of Miami, Florida. Alongside her stands Gina Colon, another 4th-year trailblazer, navigating the rigorous path of Nursing with a minor in Disability Studies. Completing this trio of dynamic women is Jazmin Pineiro, a visionary from Tampa, Florida. Jazmin is not only pursuing a Master of Science in Entrepreneurship but is also rounding off her academic achievements with a bachelor’s in business administration, specializing in Event Management.

Together, these three women embody the spirit of collaboration, resilience, and mutual support. Their journey within the MFOS community is a testament to the transformative power of connection and the enduring impact of the bonds formed in the pursuit of academic and personal growth. Through their story, we are reminded of the vital role that community plays in shaping our lives, inspiring us to reach new heights while grounding us in a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

Dayana Martinez, Gina Colon, and Jazmin Pineiro embarked on their journey to being the first in their family to attend college in Fall 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dayana stated, “It was our first semester at the University of Florida (UF), and thanks to the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholarship (MFOS), they all ended up at UF to follow their dreams and ambitions that before MFOS, which seemed unattainable.” Although they were from different places with different backgrounds and different aspirations, they were instantly connected by their love for coffee. By a twist of fate, all three happen to attend a Nitro Bike Starbucks event hosted by MFOS at the Reitz Lawn, designed to support first-generation college students, where MFOS scholars could enjoy a cup of coffee while meeting other first-year scholars. They soon found themselves swapping phone numbers at the same picnic table, eager to make new friends and start anew during a pandemic. Little did they know that this would start a beautiful friendship.

Their journey through college was marked by shared moments of hard work, laughter, and support. Whether it was on the top floor of the Reitz Union or within the walls of Marston Library, from the early morning hours until dinner time, they immersed themselves in study sessions, supporting each other through academic challenges and personal struggles alike. As a trio, they held each other accountable, offering a shoulder to lean on during moments of uncertainty and celebrating each triumph as if it were their own. Together, they forged a bond that transcended friendship; their friendship quickly grew into a support system that sustained them through the highs and lows of their college years, they became family. When Dayana was taking rigorous science courses like organic chemistry and physics, Gina and Jazmin were by her side helping her dispel feelings of imposter syndrome common in first-generation students. Together, they cheered her on and supported her pursuit of a summer internship to work with cancer patients in Latin America. Likewise, when Jazmin was applying to her master’s program at the University of Florida, Dayana and Gina supported her every step of the way. When she was interviewing for her Graduate Assistantship to work alongside her role models at the MFOS office, the girls helped with mock interviews and boosted her confidence to apply. When it was Gina’s turn to pursue her aspiration of attending nursing school, Dayana and Jazmin reciprocated the support without hesitation. They helped proofread her application essay, ensuring she presented the best version of herself to admission committees. Through it all, they were always there for each other.

Their shared involvement as peer mentors for MFOS was a pivotal steppingstone, fostering personal and leadership development and the catalyst for their enduring friendship. When the applications to become an MFOS peer mentor were released, they immediately decided that they wanted to help others the way their mentors helped them. Jazmin says, “Enthusiastically, we all met at the Reitz and started talking about the application and practicing what we wanted to say in our video.” Gina says, “It was so funny we filmed each other 30 times, perfecting our answers to showcase our best selves.” Dayana says, “At this point MFOS had already given us so much, we couldn’t let them down, so we helped each other to get the peer mentor position.” This was their first time working together to accomplish something professionally, and it didn’t end there. Jazmin is now an MFOS graduate assistant serving first-year students to help them create bonds like the ones she and her friends did. Dayana became a Leadership Team mentor and has participated in the peer mentor program for 3 years. Gina was a Peer Mentor for 2 years and always went above and beyond for her mentors. They will carry the lessons learned during their time in the Peer Mentor Program such as communication, mentorship, time management, and event planning, with them wherever they go.

The opportunities granted to them through MFOS were invaluable, laying the groundwork for their future endeavors and shaping them into the resilient individuals they are today. Thanks to MFOS, Jazmin, Dayana, and Gina removed the financial burden from their parent's shoulders and were able to support themselves financially through their 4 years of college. Furthermore, The MFOS staff was there in moments of uncertainty and provided valuable advice. Dayana says, “I came into the office once unsure about what to do for grad school, and Allison gave me her honest opinion about the master's program in the College of Public Health and Health Professions. Being first-generation, I didn’t always know all the options, and it was very overwhelming, but the MFOS office staff was there to help me navigate whatever I felt confused about.” Jazmin says, “I am so thankful to MFOS; it funded a portion of my combined master’s program while I was finishing my undergraduate degree, which saved me do much money!”. Gina says, “I am very grateful for MFOS for providing me with guidance on selecting the best major for me and giving me the opportunity to care for people in their greatest time of need.”

As they continue their respective career paths, the bonds forged during their MFOS years remained unbreakable, anchoring them in a world of uncertainty. From securing job offers to pursuing further education, they stand united in their pursuit of success, cheering each other on as they reach new milestones. Whether it's celebrating Jazmin's graduation from Warrington Business College, Gina's white coat ceremony for Nursing, or Dayana’s philanthropic accomplishments in Alpha Epsilon Delta, they stand by each other's side, celebrating each victory as a collective triumph and taking pride in each other's achievements, knowing that their strength lies in their unwavering support for one another. As they look towards the future and progress into post-graduate life, they know this support is as crucial as ever as they navigate through life's challenges. They can be confident that no matter what path one takes, they can always count on each other to be there no matter what.

Throughout their college years, they leaned on each other repeatedly, finding comfort in the bonds of friendship during life's most challenging and triumphant moments. As Jazmin prepares to embark on a new chapter in her life, walking down the aisle with her high school sweetheart, she couldn't imagine the day without her closest friends by her side. Dayana and Gina accepting to be her bridesmaids is a testament to the enduring nature of their bond, a reminder of the profound impact MFOS has had on their lives.