

COOK COLLEGE RESEARCH

Woman jumps in study of oceans

Home News Tribune Online 08/5/06

By [GINA VERGEL](#)
STAFF WRITER
gvergel@thnt.com



NEW BRUNSWICK — Rosa Leon has a passion for the world's oceans.

This summer the 20-year-old traveled from Puerto Rico to New Jersey to spend a little more than two months at Rutgers University researching the biology of the ocean.

Leon, who was born and raised in the tiny town of Villalbas, about an hour and a half from the island's capital of San Juan, participated in the university's Research in Ocean Science internship.

She spent much of her time cooped up in a lab on the Cook College campus. The hours of work culminated in a report entitled, "Assessing the Dominant Denitrifying Bacteria in the Mid-Atlantic Bight Sediments."

Boring? Anything but, Leon said.

"It was really, really cool," she said, using the word "cool" repeatedly as she talked about her experiences this summer. "We extracted DNA and our project related to organisms from around the world."

Throughout the program, Leon consulted with Dr. Lee Kerkhof, her mentor at Cook, and was assisted by lab technician Lora McGuinness.

"I gave her the nuts and bolts, but she did the work," McGuinness said. "She's an excellent student. She has great lab experience."

While the University of Puerto Rico student admits she has a penchant for all things science, her true passion is learning all she can about the ocean.

"There are so many things no one sees in the ocean, really interesting and cool stuff in molecular biology," Leon said.

She even fell in love New Jersey's coastline, in particular with the protected river and marshland at Rutgers' Marine Field Station in Little Egg Harbor.

"It's beautiful there," she said. "So cool."

The sediment Leon studied in the lab was extracted from the estuary — where the land and the river meet — in 1998, then frozen so that it could someday be researched.

Leon's dream job is to conduct research in marine biology so that she can someday help develop a drug that can benefit people.

"Research is such an important part of life," Leon said. "It's another great way to help people outside of going to medical school and becoming a doctor."

After one more year at the University of Puerto Rico, Leon hopes to attend graduate school in the United States and earn her Ph.D in molecular biology and genetics. Her older sister attends Berkley College of Music in Boston.

But for now, Leon will continue studying, and like most 20-year-olds, having a little fun.