

New tenure-track researcher joins NIEHS

By Robin Arnette

The institute welcomed a new tenure-track scientist to its growing list of in-house researchers. Jennifer Martinez, Ph.D., joined NIEHS this spring to head the Inflammation and Autoimmunity Group. Her work focuses on how the innate immune system, or the body's first line of defense against infection, deals with pathogens, environmental toxins, and the accumulation of dead cells.

Martinez is an immunologist and completed her postdoctoral fellowship at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Her lab at St. Jude studied the mechanisms of how cells die, so when she began her research there, she became interested in what happens to the cells afterwards.

"I learned at St. Jude that every 7 years you make a new skeleton, because of the turnover of cells, but where do those cells go?" Martinez wondered. "A lot of autoimmune diseases are characterized by an inability to get rid of cells, so I want to understand the immune response to these cells and how the body determines if they are a danger or part of normal processes."

Busy at the bench

Martinez has been busy doing experiments in her new lab space, and will continue to work at the bench after her staff members arrive. She does it because she loves doing research, but more importantly, she knows her commitment may eventually lead to therapies to help millions with autoimmune disorders.

"Jennifer Martinez is a great addition to the laboratory," said Anton Jetten, Ph.D., head of the NIEHS Immunity, Inflammation, and Disease Laboratory. "Her focus on the study of autophagy – the breakdown of cellular components – and its role in inflammation and immunity brings a new perspective, and one that will help us better understand inflammatory and autoimmune disease."



Martinez is a native of Hattiesburg, Mississippi and earned her doctorate at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. She and her dog, Winston, are back in familiar surroundings now that she is part of NIEHS. "I enjoyed my time when I was here," Martinez said. "We are both glad to be in an area where there are so many beautiful forests and trails." (Photo courtesy of Jennifer Martinez)

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