GETTING TO THE “WHY?”

As a little girl, Sandra Benavente-Perez was already interested in the world around her and often asked her parents to tape scientific programs, so she could watch them later. Her search for knowledge has never gone away.

“I’m a very curious person, I’m always wondering about things,” she said.

Today as an Associate Clinical Professor with her own research lab at the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Optometry, she has the opportunity to explore “why” on a daily basis. She has been part of the university’s Clinical Vision Research Center since its creation 2013 and has served as a principal investigator or sub-investigator on more than 20 clinical studies.

This is a role she doesn’t take for granted, “It’s a luxury to be able to answer your own curiosity.”

Since the early days of watching taped televised programs, Sandra has been interested in science. This interest combined with severe myopia factored into her decision to attend the College of Science and Medicine in Valladolid, Spain, where she received a degree in Optometry and Optics. From there she earned a Master’s degree in Investigative Ophthalmology and Vision Science from the University of Manchester and a PhD in Vision Science from Aston University, both in the United Kingdom.

While at Aston University, she was encouraged to submit a poster for consideration at the next Academy meeting. Her submission resulted in a travel grant to present her poster and first opportunity to travel to the United States. She still has the letter informing her that she was a travel grant recipient.

After her first Academy, she knew she had to return. “It was amazing to be around people passionate about eye research discussing fascinating eye topics,” she said. “I just sat there feeling very grateful and happy. I was blown away and had to keep coming back.”

And come back she did. “There is such access and camaraderie in this community. Everyone is willing to help each other. Every year I see deep questions being answered,” Sandra said. “It’s special to feel you are part of this grand community.”

Fellowship was the natural next step and supported her goal of continuous learning. Now, as a Fellow, she encourages her students to seek knowledge to inform their desire and ability to ask questions providing the insight and connection necessary to enhance the lives of those with eye conditions.

As Hispanic Heritage Month begins to draw to an end, Sandra, who is from Spain, appreciates the value this month of recognition brings to the broad Hispanic community. “I am so happy to see so many people celebrating and acknowledging the value and richness of each Hispanic culture.”