**Lifelong fascination with nature drew Rivera to Alaska**

By Lauren Frisch

One of Patricia Rivera’s most vivid childhood memories is from a family trip to a beautiful white sand beach in Panama, near their home at Fort Gulick Army base. Rivera, who was about four years old at the time, remembers playing in the clear, bright ocean water that was no more than knee deep. Behind her, a long line of young stingrays sunbathed, offset in what seemed to be a purposeful pattern.

Growing up in Panama, at the bottom tip of Central America, Rivera was regularly exposed to nature and different environments.

“Even when I was this young, I remember saying to some adult that when I grow up I want to protect the animals,” Rivera said. “That must have come from the great exposure I had to a large variety of animals that were part of everyday life in Panama.”

Rivera, who has worked on and off at the University of Alaska Fairbanks College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences since the late 1980s in various research and technical roles, attributes much of her adventurous and animal-loving personality to the positive experiences she had in her outdoorsy, close-knit community as a kid.

She said living on an army base as a child made her feel as though the world was small. Her multicultural community was filled with all sorts of interesting people from different parts of the world. Everyone and everything felt accessible to her, and she appreciated learning from people with different stories and burdens.

“Growing up like this, nobody was surprising to me,” Rivera said.

In addition, Rivera explained, Panama is filled with animals that can seriously hurt you if you aren’t careful. “We grew up with this very real awareness and respect for our surroundings, which helped foster my desire to protect them.”

Rivera moved from Panama after the first grade, but she maintained her interest in learning about animals, protecting the environment and surrounding herself with complex people.

Rivera’s adventurous nature has led her to a variety of jobs all over the United States. During her time as an undergraduate at the Agnes Scott College she worked as a blackjack dealer. While finishing up her bachelor’s degree at the Florida Institute of Technology, she surveyed loggerhead sea turtles. During graduate school at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Rivera helped pay her tuition by catering. After graduate school, she worked for Fairbanks Animal Control.

Since moving to Fairbanks in 1988, Rivera has worked in various research positions with CFOS, preparing and analyzing soil, water and species samples. Her favorite position with CFOS was as a lab manager for a group that studied the health of Steller sea lions in Alaska from 2004-2010.

Rivera is currently the facilities coordinator for CFOS, where she manages maintenance logistics, tracks equipment and maintains safety standards for the college. This includes coordinating use of freezers and storage to serving on safety-related committees. One committee is a campus-wide group that helps UAF workers dealing with Title IX issues while conducting field work.

When she first moved to Fairbanks, Rivera was quickly drawn to the ambitious lifestyle, as well as the willingness to help others in need.

In many ways, the connection Rivera feels to the people and culture in Fairbanks resembles the connection she had felt to Panama when she was younger. Here she knows friends from all over the world, who came to Fairbanks with different unusual experiences, many whom are excited and inspired by the natural world.

“I was immediately comfortable in Fairbanks,” she said. “People here feel like they can do anything. And whenever I have car trouble, or need help fixing something, there is no shortage of friendly neighbors who are willing to provide assistance. I’ve become very spoiled by the high quality people I have met here.”

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***Cutlines***

*Jennifer Questel photo
Pat Rivera, pictured standing at the bow of the NOAA ship Ronald H. Brown during an ocean acidification project in summer 2015, is the facilities coordinator for the UAF College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences.*

*Photo by Jennifer Questel
UAF's Pat Rivera, with Nick Delich from the NOAA Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, samples from an oceanography instrument during a 2014 cruise in the Gulf of Alaska.*