



Researcher Wins Early-Career Presidential Award

Tufts professor Marina Bers recently received the nation's top award for early-career researchers.

Medford/Somerville, Mass. [09.05.06] Tufts' Marina Bers has received a 2005 Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (PECASE)—the highest honor given by the U.S. government to outstanding researchers at the early stages of their careers. The assistant professor of child development, who has a secondary appointment in the computer science department, was recognized for her pilot research into how virtual environments can foster positive development in severely ill youth who are at risk for mental-health problems.

The *Arlington Advocate* noted that the Argentine-born mother of three was nominated for the presidential award by the National Science Foundation, which gave her a Career Award last year, along with a five-year grant for her work on virtual communities of learning and care. At the center of that work is “Zora,” a virtual tool she developed as part of her doctoral work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“For my thesis, I developed ... Zora, where many kids can connect to create a virtual city,” Bers, who became a U.S. citizen in 2001, told the Buenos Aires-based newspaper *La Nacion*. After earning her master's and doctoral degrees from MIT, she came to Tufts in 2001 “to investigate how virtual worlds can help promote the health of hospitalized children,” the publication reported.

In an initial pilot project, Bers used Zora to help young kidney dialysis patients at Children's Hospital Boston.

Encouraged by the results of her first project, Bers is “expanding this work with children who have received organ transplants,” according to the *Advocate*. She is leading a longitudinal study focused on how creating a virtual environment can promote positive development kidney, lung and heart transplant patients and encourage these young patients to adhere to their treatment protocols.

Mass High Tech reported that these children can “create their own worlds equipped with restaurants that serve transplant-friendly meals and community centers filled with avatars (picture representation of a person) representing other transplant patients.”

According to *United Press International*, Bers' goal is to help children deal with the emotional aftermath of organ transplants.

“Adolescents who have had an organ transplant have, in a sense, acquired a chronic, severe illness that will change their lives forever,” Bers said, according to *UPI*. “In addition to physical challenges, they face stress, uncertainty and isolation plus the typical issues that adolescence brings, such as a need to assert their independence.”

Bers continued, “As a result, these patients may stop taking their medication or rebel against instructions from their doctors.”

In the current study, post-transplant patients will use Zora at home, and their development will be evaluated over time.

Bers traveled to the White House to accept her award on July 26. In her acceptance speech, she reflected on another journey more than a decade ago.

“Twelve years ago I left my home in Argentina with the dream of coming to the States to study with pioneers in the emerging field of children and technology,” Bers said. “For me, this award is recognition of the fact that women can do good science—and they can do good science as spouses and mothers. It’s also recognition of the fact that Latin-American immigrants to this country can make a career and contribute to their own discipline and to society, even if our accent never goes away.”

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