Gregory Quirk for José Antunes Rodrigues Prize Lectureship

Dr. Gregory Quirk is a neuroscientist whose groundbreaking work on fear extinction and memory reconsolidation is matched by an extraordinary lifelong commitment to building neuroscience capacity in developing countries, from establishing the first neuroscience laboratory in Honduras as a Fulbright Fellow to mentoring young faculty at the University of the Philippines, embodying Antunes Rodrigues's vision of science as a bridge across economic and geographic divides.

Professor José Antunes Rodrigues dedicated his life to proving that scientific excellence is not the property of wealthy nations alone. He built Brazilian neuroscience from the ground up, trained more than 50 principal investigators, and tirelessly organized international conferences to democratize access to cutting-edge science. In Dr. Gregory Quirk, we find a kindred spirit, a neuroscientist whose scientific brilliance is matched only by his profound commitment to building neuroscience capacity in the world's most underserved regions.

Scientifically, Dr. Quirk is a world leader in the neurobiology of fear and anxiety. His pioneering work on the infralimbic prefrontal cortex and its role in fear extinction has fundamentally changed our understanding of how memories of safety are formed and maintained, discoveries with direct translational relevance to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety disorders. His research on memory reconsolidation and active avoidance has opened new therapeutic windows for treating obsessive-compulsive disorder.

But what distinguishes Dr. Quirk as a candidate for the Antunes Rodrigues Lectureship is his extraordinary trajectory of service through science. After completing his Ph.D. at SUNY Downstate, he worked with the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), documenting stress disorders in families targeted by state violence. This human rights work led to a Fulbright Fellowship to establish the first neuroscience research laboratory in Honduras, a country with no prior history of modern behavioral neuroscience. There, he investigated the effects of malnutrition in rodent models and in children, addressing problems that matter locally.

He then spent 25 years in Puerto Rico, first at the Ponce School of Medicine and later at the University of Puerto Rico, training generations of Latin American students and postdoctoral fellows. In 2021, at a stage when most scientists would slow down, Dr. Quirk relocated to the University of the Philippines-Manila, where he is now mentoring young faculty at the National Institutes of Health to establish the country's first rodent-based behavioral neuroscience programs, supported by the new "Brain and Mental Health" funding initiative from the Philippine Department of Science and Technology.

Dr. Quirk's career spanning Central America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia is a living testament to the conviction that science progresses fastest when all minds, regardless of geography, are brought to the table. He has trained countless students from diverse backgrounds, and he has done so not in Boston or London, but in Tegucigalpa, Ponce, San Juan, and Manila.

For these reasons, Dr. Gregory Quirk is an ideal recipient of the José Antunes Rodrigues Lectureship, awarded to a scientist who embodies the same heroic dedication to international collaboration, mentorship, and service to under-represented communities that defined Professor Antunes Rodrigues's remarkable life.