5,000th SAA member gives back to USF

By Elizabeth Engasser, Class of 2015

When Gabriel Arrillaga left his home in San Juan, Puerto Rico to attend USF last year, he worried that his chances for success would be hindered by some big challenges. He didn’t know anyone at the school, he’d be living off campus with a relative, and he’s a native Spanish speaker.

“It was really scary because never in my life had I taken all of my classes in English,” he said. He also knew that student success is directly linked to involvement in university life, so he needed to find a way to fast-track the getting-to-know-you phase.

He found it at CampU, an off-campus bonding experience hosted by USF’s New Student Connections, which helps newcomers plug into university life. The August weekend, held before the start of fall classes, set Arrillaga on a path that led to an auspicious occasion in January: He became the 5,000th member of the Student Alumni Association (SAA), the student chapter of the national USF Alumni Association and USF’s largest student organization. The SAA provides a means for students to interact with each other and alumni.

“For me personally, being involved equals being successful, and that’s what SAA and New Student Connections promote,” he said. “Being involved really helps me to get higher grades.”

The SAA also appealed to Arrillaga because he’d already experienced the positive impact alumni can have on students. It was thanks to an Alumni Association CampU scholarship, one of a dozen the Association awards each year, that Arrillaga was able to experience the transformative weekend.

In his first year at USF, Arrillaga has used all that he learned during CampU to stay busy. He’s taken part in awareness and service projects such as Hunger Banquet, Tunnel of Oppression and Stampedes of Service. He became the community service and fundraising chair for the Boricua Student Association, a Puerto Rico-oriented student organization, and he works part-time as a lifeguard.

His success at getting involved prompted him to sign up to be a counselor for next year’s CampU.

“It takes me a lot of time with my job and 15 credit hours, but it’s pretty rewarding,” he said.

It seems almost full circle for Arrillaga to be such a significant number for the SAA, said Kimberly Choto, the Association’s associate executive director.

“It validates all of the hard work the New Student Connections team does to engage these freshmen to find their passion, their unique niche and get involved at USF,” she said. “We know that engaged students become engaged alumni, and I have no doubt we will be hearing great things from Gabriel for years to come.”