Working at the Philadelphia Animal Hospital one summer, Felipe Garcia realized his path in a veterinary medicine career. A client came in who spoke only Spanish, and he instinctively offered to step in and translate.

Growing up in Miami, Garcia was the translator for his single mother, an immigrant from Mexico. She relied on her only child to help her navigate the English-speaking world.

“I realized that is something I can offer, since Spanish is my first language, to make sure that the language barrier does not stand in the way of care for a pet,” said Garcia, president of the Penn Vet Class of 2019. “It’s like a calling to help the people and animals where I grew up, a niche I can fill to give back to the community.”

That same summer, before his junior year at Hamilton College, Garcia was at Penn Vet participating in Summer VETS—a one-week program to give university and high school students hands-on experience at a vet school.

“I knew after that summer that this is what I wanted to do with my life,” Garcia said. “Penn was the only veterinary school I applied to. I was really set on Penn, primarily because of the Summer VETS program.”

Garcia is most interested in small animal medicine, and perhaps a specialty in surgery. “I am impressed with the caseload at Ryan Hospital and the focus on research,” he said.

Now 23, Garcia said he has always loved animals, collecting “animal facts” cards as a child and watching shows on the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. The summer after graduating from Coral Gables High School, he worked at the Jungle Island zoological park in Miami, helping the veterinarian.

“For me it didn’t feel like work,” he said. “I knew working with animals was something I wanted to pursue.”

A standout in the large, public high school, Garcia was on the Dean’s List, in the National Honor Society, and held the rank of captain in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) drill team, winning the Florida state championship at rifle spinning. He was the first in his family to graduate from high school.

Going to college was going to be a stretch, he knew, but he applied for scholarships—taking information from flyers on the counselors’ bulletin board. Winning a full, four-year scholarship through The Posse Foundation, Garcia chose Hamilton College in snowy upstate New York.

Hamilton was a challenge beyond the weather. Garcia says he had to work extra to catch up to his classmates. But like in high school, Garcia excelled at Hamilton, making the Dean’s List while working as a resident advisor, a biology laboratory teaching assistant, and a communications speech coach. He took part in student government as the senior class president, earned the 2014 campus service award, and even won the “Mr. Hamilton” pageant, a fundraiser.

Summers were spent working as a veterinary technician at the Philadelphia Animal Hospital. After graduating from Hamilton, he returned to Jungle Island as a vet tech and media spokesperson.

This summer, he plans to go on a Penn Vet trip to Thailand. Participants provide discounted and free veterinary care, performing spays and neuters in an effort to decrease the stray dog population.

Eventually, Garcia plans to return to his hometown, ideally to a small animal practice.

“In my community in Miami, veterinary care is not viewed as important. Language and cultural barriers get in the way,” Garcia said. “I think I can be the person to break down those barriers.”