

The Element September 2024



▲ *Elsie Eckert joyfully greets Isaac Brownell, 1997 BRASS Scholar who returned to Houston for Tea & Toddies*

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Former BRASS Scholars Julia Elvin and Isacc Brownell return for T&T
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Ashley Hayden receives prestigious award



▲ *Mary and Tony Gracely graciously hosted and underwrote our 2024 Tea & Toddies fundraiser.*



▲ *Judi and Jack Johnson catch up with longtime friend Tony Gracely.*



▲ *Guests enjoyed a seated dinner in the Gracely's full sized gymnasium.*

A Message from the BRASS President

Dear BRASS Family and Friends,

As we welcome fall 2024, and embrace the end our 29th year, we are grateful to many:

- **Mary and Tony Gracely** for so graciously opening their home and completely underwriting our 29th Tea & Toddies, allowing all the money raised to go directly to BRASS research funding. They welcomed more than 120 guests for a seated dinner, an evening of fun, and terrific camaraderie.
- **Our Donors** for their continued, dedicated support of our BRASS scholars, who continue to be a part of so many outstanding contributions to research for the Baylor College of Medicine Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.
- **Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo** for their continued belief in BRASS with their \$60,000 donation to support and fund the Scholars' equipment to carry out their research, trips for to attend seminars and present their lab findings, and for funding to support community outreach.
- **Judi and Jack Johnson** for contributing an additional \$50,000 every year to the David and Eula Wintermann Foundation BRASS Scholar Research Award Endowment, which funds discretionary research stipends for each BRASS scholar while they work to achieve their Ph.D.'s. To date they have funded 47 of our scholars \$3,000 a year until they have finished their Ph.D.'s
- **The BRASS Executive Committee** for their continued support and insight
- **Scholar's Reception underwriting** from Myra Wilson, Jo Ann Petersen, and Sidney Faust



▲ *Elsie Eckert with Stella*

In September we will select and welcome our four new 2024-2025 BRASS Scholars. These outstanding scientists will bring us to a total of 91 scholars since our inception in 1995. BRASS Scholarships are increasingly effective in attracting the best and the brightest students who add to the College's ever-growing expertise in biomedical research. We could not do it without your support, so it is with heartfelt appreciation I once again say THANK YOU!

The BRASS Board and I are grateful for your continued belief in our mission. ~ Elsie

2024 BRASS Tea & Toddies - Celebrating 29 Years

An Amazing Evening of Friends, Fun and Fond Memories

May 1, 2024, Baylor Research Advocates for Student Scientists raised their glasses in grand style to toast the bright future of biomedical research and our BRASS Scholars' ground breaking research at our annual Tea & Toddies fundraiser. This 29th anniversary celebration for BRASS was held at the magnificent home of Mary and Tony Gracely who magnanimously welcomed more than 120 guests for an evening of fun and enjoyment.

More than \$35,000 was raised to help support and further the BRASS mission of "providing funding and support for the best and brightest students" through endowed scholarships and research awards.



▲ Twenty-three (23) past and current BRASS Scholars along with Mary and Tony Gracely celebrate joyously the 29th BRASS Tea & Toddies anniversary fundraising event.



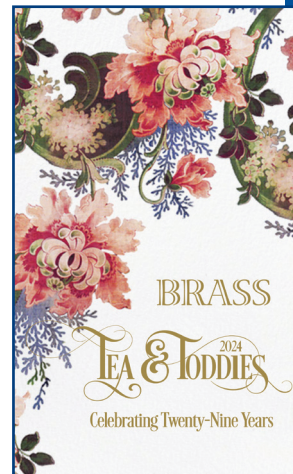
▲ BRASS Scholar Sharon Bright Amanya presents her Mentor Dr. William Decker the 2024 Diana Brown Memorial Mentor of the Year Award



▲ Myra Wilson and Dr. Rachel N. Arey present Ashley Hayden the Don D. Jordan BRASS Outstanding Trailblazer Scientist Award.



▲ Linda Kuykendall and Elsie Eckert surprise Michele Collins when they announce she has been selected as the 2024 BRASS Angel of the Year.



▲ It was a festive 29-year Tea & Toddies celebration.

Sharon Bright Amanya surprised her mentor **Dr. William Decker** when she announced he had been selected as the recipient of **Diana Brown Memorial Mentor of the Year Award for 2024**. He was selected over six other nominated mentors to receive the award. **Michelle Collins**, our Recording Secretary and also Mentoring Event Liaison was deservedly awarded the **BRASS 2024 Angel of the Year Award**.

BRASS Scholar **Ashley Hayden** was unanimously voted to be the recipient of our second annual **Don D. Jordan BRASS Outstanding Trailblazer Scientist Award** for being a pioneer in her endeavors and opening up new lines of research and technology; for being a ground breaker and innovator, creating new breakthroughs and exemplifying the traits of an outstanding future leader with unparalleled academic performance, research excellence, publications, fellowships, grants, patents, and presentations; combined with citizenship encompassing past honors, awards teaching, tutoring, community service and outreach.

2024 BRASS Tea & Toddies - Celebrating 29 Years



Celebrating 29 Years

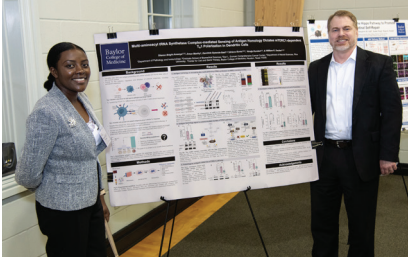


1. *Mary Gracely*
2. *Jody Merritt, Myra Wilson and English Laserna*
3. *Paige Hall and Christine Johnson*
4. *Carl and Linda Kuykendall*
5. *Francois Marks, Peter VanDerlofske and Dominique Armstrong*
6. *Daniel Irion and Karen Payne*
7. *John Maguire and Tony Gracely*
8. ***Dr. Matt Baker**, John Maguire, Elva Godwin, Cherryll Frick, Janet Hansen, **Dr. Issac Brownell** and Robin Simon*
9. *Jack and Judi Johnson and Ed McMahon*
10. *Cody Bowman and Myra Wilson*
11. *Karen Payne, Daniel Irion, Elsie Eckert, Jacque Baly, James Craig*
12. *Kathleen and Tom Mach*
13. *Jill and Tony Gracely and Ashley Hayden*
14. *Jacque Baly and Kirk Kveton*
15. *Arary and Chuck Simmons, Ed McMahon and Hershey Grace*
16. *Heidi and Nick Rockecharlie with Elsie Eckert*
17. *David and Mary Ann McKeithan and Mady Kades*
18. *Ashley Hayden and Ed McMahon*
19. *Linda Kuykendall, **Dr. James Bonar**, Tamara Klosz Bonar, **Jeanie Smith** and **English Laserna***
20. *Francois Marks and Ed Smith*
21. *Elsie Eckert and **Dr. William Decker***
22. ***Michal Tyrlik**, Andy Wu, **Mariah Berner**, Tamara and **Dr. James Bonar***
23. *Mary and Tony Gracely and **Malcolm McDonald***
24. *Elsie Eckert and **Ashley Hayden***
25. ***Jennifer Deger** and Robin Simon*
26. ***Joesph Zoeller**, Myra Wilson and **Dr. William** and **Mrs Brownell***
27. *Evelyn and John Baik with **Linda Zhang-Baik**.*
28. *Tom Mach, Elsie Eckert and **Dean Carolyn Smith**.*
29. ***Michal Tyrlik** and Jody Merritt*
30. *Mary Ann and David McKeithan and Tony Gracely*
31. ***Dr. and Mrs. Pedro A. Piedra** with **Emily Schultz***

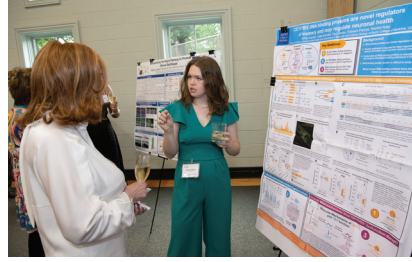
Bolded names denote BRASS Scholars

BRASS Scholars Spotlight

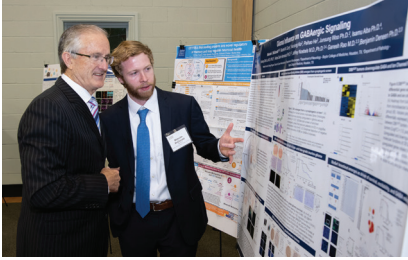
Poster Presentations Add Scientific Interest to T&T



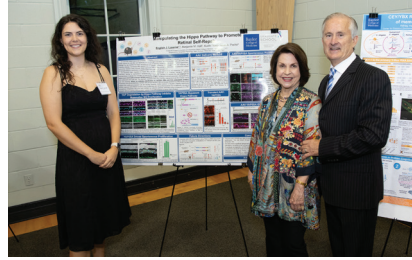
▲ Sharon Bright Amanya, Ph.D. (2020-2021) with Dr. William Decker



▲ Ashley Hayden Ph.D. (2019-2020) visits with Myra Wilson



▲ Malcolm McDonald MD/Ph.D. (2021-2022) visits with Tony Gracely



▲ English Laserna Ph.D. (2021-2022) with Mary & Tony Gracely

Always a special highlight at our Tea & Toddie fundraiser, adding insight and intellectual interest, is the presentation of the scholars scientific posters. Four BRASS scholars set up their scientific posters and graciously share with guests what their research entails, as well as their findings.

A scientific poster is a popular method of succinctly presenting research findings at meetings and conferences. Posters summarize a scholar's research project using a mix of text and diagrams/images.

A poster allows a scholar to condense the aims, methods, results and conclusions of their research into a portable form of presentation. It also allows interested peers to understand their research in their absence, simply by reading through their poster. Presenting research in the form of a poster at meetings or conferences can also boost the scholar's CV as it shows potential employers that they are motivated and creative.

Defenses, Graduations, and Moving Forward

This past spring and summer, BRASS scholars **Dominique Armstrong** and **Ashley Hayden** defended and received their Ph.D.s. Dominique's dissertation focused on how cancer reprograms the immune system to evade destruction, which has been paradigm-shifting and has vastly improved cancer treatment outcomes. Dominique will relocate to Seattle, WA, for her post-doctoral work at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

Ashley's defense focused on the YBX gene in worms and its relationship to memory control, which mirrors human patients with intellectual disability. Ashley will be a medical writer for the Neuroscience Education Institute, keeping doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals up-to-date on new research and drugs.

Matthew Penna and **Patrick Hunt** were awarded their MD/PhDs in May. Matt has moved to South Beach with his wife, Molly, and daughter, Matilda, to complete his residency training in dermatology at the University of Miami. Patrick matched to the Yale Ophthalmology Residency Program and moved to New Haven with his wife, Fabiola.



▲ Dominique Armstrong



▲ Ashley Hayden



▲ Matthew Penna



▲ Patrick Hunt

Julia Elvin, MD/PhD (1995-1996) Shares How BRASS Shaped Her Career



▲ Dr. Julia Elvin

Reflecting on my journey, which began 29 years ago as BRASS’s inaugural scholarship recipient, I am filled with immense gratitude. At 21, as a shy Californian new to Houston, I was thrust into a world rich with cultural and social engagements—thanks to BRASS. The invitations from BRASS members to events—rodeos, ranches, the Texas Heart Ball, to name a few—were not just outings; they were mentoring sessions with some of Houston’s most successful and interesting figures. These experiences were critical in developing the networking and communication skills that would prove essential throughout my career.

My early research in Dr. Matzuk’s lab at Baylor, which delved into gene alterations affecting the female reproductive system and infertility, laid the groundwork for my subsequent work at Brigham and Women’s Hospital on ovarian and uterine cancers. However, it was joining the biotechnology startup Foundation Medicine where I truly bridged the gap between bench research and bedside application. In my various roles, I have explained to diverse stakeholders—from investors to government regulators—how tumor DNA profiling can transform cancer care, gaining their endorsement and advancing the field. This work has contributed to the Cancer Moonshot, yielded multiple FDA-approved diagnostic tests, advanced clinical trials for new cancer drugs, and helped over a million cancer patients better understand their tumors and identify personalized treatment plans.

Now, as the Senior Vice President and Head of Precision Oncology at Foundation Medicine, I continue to lead research on the genomic underpinnings of various cancers and explore how molecular profiling can impact treatment decisions and patient outcomes. My ongoing passion for medically relevant research, ignited at Baylor, and the self-confidence your support engendered are testaments to the enduring impact of the BRASS scholarship. I am profoundly thankful for the foundation it laid for my career.

Isaac Brownell, MD/PhD (1997-1998) Reflects on BRASS

I was thrilled to attend the 2024 BRASS Tea & Toddies event hosted at Mary and Tony Gracely’s home. The evening celebrated the achievements of Scholars, mentors, scientists, and BRASS members. I briefly shared the stage with the first BRASS scholar, Julia Elvin, to recount the impact and meaning of being a BRASS Scholar in the organization’s early years.

As an Investigator at the National Institutes of Health, I direct a clinical program for patients with high-risk skin cancers and run a lab where we study skin cancers. My journey to this position involved collaboration with various agencies, foundations, and organizations that support scientists in training. While all are committed to funding excellence in graduate education, not one comes close to providing the personal support and encouragement BRASS lavishes on its scholars.

Science is difficult, and being a graduate student can, at times, be frustrating. Knowing there was a wonderful community of people who were personally invested in supporting me as a Scholar and as a person always buoyed my spirits and helped me maximize my graduate training. I will always be grateful for the fateful flight that seated Myra Wilson next to Bonnie Dunbar so that they could create the spark that kindled BRASS. The BRASS membership should be proud of the scientific careers they have helped launch and all the impactful biomedical advances that have resulted.



▲ Dr. Isaac Brownell

BRASS Officers 2024–2025

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Scholar Selection Committee *Edna Meyer Nelson*[†]

BCM Liaison/Mentor *Dr. Huda Zoghbi*

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[†]Scholar Selection Committee Member

BRASS Giving

In Memory of
Edna P. Pignataro
Robin Simon

In Honor of
Myra Wilson
Lynn Kamin Gremillion
Janet Hansen
Robin Simon

In Honor of
Elsie and Les Eckert
Cora Sue Mach
Stephen D. Pappan
Dr. David Wright

In Memory of **Robert L. Stokes**
Donna Stokes