

The Element

November 2025

inside



▲ Carl and Linda Kuykendall, Robin Simon, Les and Elsie Eckert welcome guests to the BRASS 30th Anniversary celebration.

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Don D. Jordan BRASS Outstanding Trailblazer Scientist Award Academic Milestones



▲ BRASS Scholar Malcolm McDonald surprises his mentor Dr. Ben Deneen with the 2025 Diana Brown Memorial Mentor of the year award.



▲ BRASS Scholar Sharon Bright Amanya shares how impactful BRASS funding and support has been to her life and her research.



▲ Dr. Geoff Predis, our 2006 BRASS Scholar told how BRASS shaped his life in his early years of research and how it has carried forth in his career today as a pediatric gastroenterologist at Texas Children's Hospital.

A Message from the BRASS President

Dear BRASS Members and Supporters,

It has truly been a banner year for BRASS as we proudly celebrate our 30th anniversary and our milestone accomplishment of awarding our 95th scholarship.

As we plan the next 30 years, we remain dedicated to our belief that **Research is the Answer**. The impact we have made is an inspiring reminder of what can be achieved when supporters like you unite around a shared purpose. Your generosity makes it possible for BRASS to continue making a significant difference in the lives of promising young scientists and their research achievements.

We are grateful to many:

Elizabeth and Anthony DeLuca for graciously opening their home for our 30th Tea & Toddlies fundraiser and to **Edna Meyer Nelson** for generously underwriting the event, ensuring that all proceeds directly benefit BRASS's research initiatives. Over 125 guests joined us for cocktails, dinner, and an evening filled with engaging conversation and camaraderie.

Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo for their ongoing support and recent \$60,000 donation, which enables our BRASS scholars to acquire essential research equipment, attend seminars, present their findings, and further our community outreach efforts.

Judi and Jack Johnson for contributing an additional \$1 million to the David and Eula Wintermann Foundation BRASS Scholar Research Award Endowment. This greater than \$3 million endowment funds discretionary research stipends for each BRASS Ph.D. candidate every year they work to achieve their Ph.D. This generous contribution now takes each scholar's annual research stipend to \$7,000. To date they have funded 51 of our scholars.

The BRASS Executive team and our newly elected BRASS Member Chairs for their continued support and insight.

Our 2025 Scholar's Reception underwriting donors Jo Ann Petersen, and Edna Meyer Nelson.

The BRASS Scholar Selection Committee in September they selected and welcomed our four new 2025-2026 BRASS Scholars, bringing our total to 95 scholarships since 1995. These exceptional scientists contribute to the College's growing reputation in biomedical research, as the BRASS Scholarships continue to attract outstanding students.

It is an honor to lead this organization, and I look forward to another year of supporting the **research that will define the disease**. On behalf of the BRASS Board, we thank each of you for your commitment to our mission.



▲ Elsie Eckert with Emmy



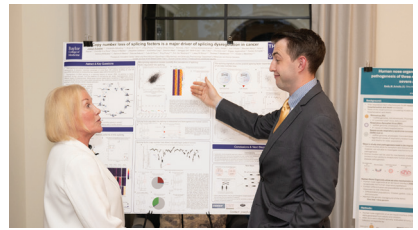
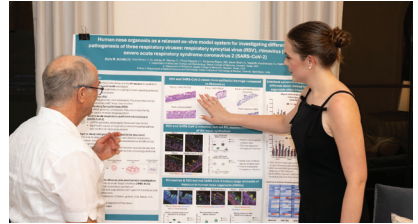
▲ Twenty-five (25) past and current scholars enjoyed the 30th BRASS Anniversary celebration.



▲ Myra Wilson and Linda Kuykendall surprise BRASS board member Dr. James Bonar with the 2025 Angel of the Year award.



▲ A BRASS surprise salute to our BRASS Founder Myra Wilson with 30 red roses.



▲ BRASS Scholars Emily Schultz and Joesph Zoeller utilize their posters to share the scientific results with Dr. Pedro A. Piedra and BRASS president Elsie Eckert.

Celebrating Three Decades of Impact

On May 6, 2025, the Baylor Research Advocates for Student Scientists (BRASS) marked a significant milestone—its 30th Anniversary. The occasion was commemorated with an elegant gathering at the River Oaks residence of **Anthony and Elizabeth Deluca**, generously underwritten by **Edna Meyer Nelson**.

The evening was not only a celebration of BRASS's achievements over three decades but also a successful fundraising event. Attendees raised their glasses in support, helping to collect over \$50,000. These funds will further the BRASS mission: providing essential funding and support to exceptional student scientists through endowed scholarships and research awards.

The anniversary celebration combined the spirit of philanthropy with an atmosphere of joy. Supporters gathered for a night dedicated to fundraising and fun, all in honor of advancing scientific research and supporting the brightest minds of tomorrow.



2025 BRASS Tea & Toddies - Celebrating 30 Years



Celebrating 30 Years



1. Any Ayre and Tamara Klosz Bonar
2. Linda Kuykendall, Elsie Eckert and Jeanie Smith
3. Dr. Jacquie Baly and James Craig
4. Hershey Grace and Andy Delery
5. Drs. John and Cora Gonzalez
6. Dr. Gayle Slaughter and Les Eckert
7. Dionne Breen and Andy Delery
8. Jack and Judi Johnson
9. Kirk Kveton and Cheryl Byington
10. Ed McMahon and Hershey Grace
11. Shelby Kibodeaux and Bruce Padilla
12. Leisa Holland Bowman, Cheryl Byington, Debby Leighton and Beth Wolff
13. Francoise Marks and Peter VanDerlofske
14. Dr Huda Zoghbi, Elsie Eckert and Terri Wang
15. Tor and Astrid VanDyke
16. Dr. Sameer Seth and Dr. James Versalovic with BRASS Scholars
17. Dr. James Bonar and Tamara Klosz Bonar
18. Cody Bowman and Lynn Kamin
19. Jack Johnson, Myra Wilson, Judi Johnson and Ed McMahon
20. Elsie Eckert and Dr. William Decker
21. Edna Meyer Nelson and Jody Merritt
22. Dr. Matthew Baker and Juleitte Baker
23. Mariah Berner Wu and Andy Wu
24. Larry and Cindy Burns
25. Dr. Tuan Chao and Dr. Mingshan Xue
26. Eric Garcia, Michal Tyrlik and Paige Hall
27. James Craig, Dr. Jacquie Baly, Ann Ayre and Terri Wang
28. Brandi Small and Donna Stokes
29. Daniel Irion, Myra Wilson and Kirk Kveton
30. Dr. William Decker, Myra Wilson, Sharon Bright Amanya, Elsie Eckert and Linda Kuykendall
31. Matthew Ehrenburg, Likhita Nanigam and Justin Dhindsa
32. Phillip Burkhardt, Sarah Waldvogel and Elliot
33. Stephen Hick, Sarah Herzog and Ed

Bolded names denote BRASS Scholars

Recognition of Excellence



▲ **Dr. William Decker and BRASS Founder Myra Wilson surprise BRASS Scholar Sharon Bright Amanya with the Don D. Jordan BRASS Outstanding Trailblazer Scientist Award.**

Sharon Bright Amanya, BRASS Scholar and Ph.D. candidate, was unanimously selected as the recipient of the third annual **Don D. Jordan BRASS Outstanding Trailblazer Scientist Award**.

This prestigious honor was bestowed upon Amanya for her pioneering spirit and innovative contributions to research and technology. Her work has opened new avenues of exploration, marking her as a true groundbreaker and innovator in her field. She consistently demonstrates the qualities expected of a future leader, with an exceptional record of academic achievement.

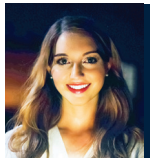
Amanya's accomplishments encompass outstanding academic performance, research excellence, and a remarkable portfolio that includes numerous publications, fellowships, grants, patents, and presentations. She also exemplifies citizenship through her past honors, awards, teaching, tutoring, and dedicated service to the community.

Upon receiving the award, Amanya expressed sincere appreciation to her mentor, **Dr. William Decker**, acknowledging his influential role in guiding her research journey. She concluded her remarks by stating, "I'm so proud to be a part of this incredible community and I am excited for what the future holds for BRASS."

BRASS Scholars Achieve Significant Academic Milestones



▲ **Sarah Waldvogel**
M.D. / Ph.D.
(2020/2021)



▲ **Jennifer Deger**
M.D. / Ph.D.
(2020/2021)



▲ **Kali Deans**
M.D. / Ph.D.
(2018/2019)



▲ **Chiraag Kapadia**
M.D. / Ph.D.
(2019/2020)



▲ **Vicki Mercado**
M.D. / Ph.D.
(2019/2020)



▲ **Linda Zhang**
M.D. / Ph.D.
(2018/2019)

This past spring and summer marked a period of remarkable achievement for BRASS scholars. **Sarah Waldvogel** and **Jennifer Deger** successfully defended their dissertations and earned their Ph.D. degrees. **Sarah's** research centered on gene mutations, specifically the loss of DNMT3A, which can result in abnormal cell growth and is linked to various cancers, especially hematological malignancies. Her work contributes to a deeper understanding of how DNMT3A loss affects cancer risk and informs potential treatment strategies.

Jennifer Deger's dissertation focused on identifying the nervous system requirements of Alzheimer's disease genes using fruit flies as a model. The research revealed that both fruit flies and humans display similar behaviors when responding to stimuli, particularly in areas related to learning and memory. Both **Sarah** and **Jennifer** are MD/Ph.D. candidates and will be returning to medical school at Baylor College of Medicine to continue their training.

In May, BRASS Scholars **Linda Zhang**, **Vicki Merrcado-Evans**, **Kali Deans Fielder**, and **Chiraag Kapadia** were all awarded their MD/Ph.D. degrees. **Linda Zhang** will begin her residency in Pathology at Stanford Medicine. **Vicki Merrcado-Evans** matched at Baylor College of Medicine, also in Pathology. **Kali Deans Fielder** will pursue her residency in Pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine/Texas Children's Hospital through the Pediatric Scientist Training Program (PSTP). **Chiraag Kapadia** will be completing his residency in Internal Medicine at Harvard/Brigham & Women's Hospital.

Congratulations to these outstanding scientists for reaching such important milestones in their careers. Their dedication and hard work have paved the way for continued success and future contributions to medical science.

BRASS Highlights

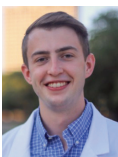
The Importance of Donor Contributions to our BRASS Scholars Research

Your donations play a crucial role in the success of BRASS. Unlike many scholarship programs, BRASS offers a unique opportunity: each scholarship recipient can apply for essential research funding throughout their PhD studies. This support is vital, as most laboratories do not have discretionary budgets to purchase necessary equipment or support conference attendance, both of which are essential for advancing scientific research and career development. BRASS bridges this gap, ensuring scholars have the resources they need to succeed.

To qualify for research funding, scholars must complete detailed grant requests specifying the equipment they need or the medical conferences they wish to attend. Each application requires signed approval from both their mentor and the Dean of the College of Biomedical Sciences. Once submitted, these requests are reviewed by the BRASS Grant Request Committee, which consists of five members: three community leaders, a doctor, and a Ph.D. The committee carefully evaluates each request and strives to fund as many as possible.

Support from donors—including individuals like you, HLS&R, the Donald E. McMahon Endowment, and the Buck Bukowski Endowment—is vital to fulfilling these requests. Your generosity directly impacts the ability of BRASS to fund scholars' research and professional growth.

Please read about some of the projects we have funded in just the second half of this year, highlighting the impact of your continued support.



Joseph R. Zoeller M.D. / Ph.D. (2022/2023)

\$10,000 - Therapies that galvanize the immune system against Cancer

Funding to support a Perturb-seq experiment, allowing me to systematically profile the genetic disruptions which create immunogenic mis-spliced RNAs— an endeavor that will enable the development of new therapies that galvanize the immune system against **cancer**. Important work within the field has shown that disruption of RNA splicing is a hallmark feature of **cancer**.



English Laserna Ph.D. (2021/2022)

\$3884 – Scientific travel –Speciality is Macular Degeneration

Funding to attend the Human and Mammalian Genetics Short Course at the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine. This was a true **highlight of my graduate school journey**. Over two weeks, I had the privilege of meeting leaders who have shaped modern genetics, including Francis Collins, the former NIH Director who guided U.S. biomedical research for over 30 years and led the Human Genome Project. This experience propelled me to receive multiple postdoctoral offers from labs at Johns Hopkins, the Jackson Laboratory, and King's College London.



Mariah Berner-Wu Ph.D. (2020/2021)

\$3,897 – Scientific Travel in the area of Breast Cancer Research

Funding to support scientific travel to the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) annual meeting 2026 conference. This is one of the largest **cancer research** conferences, bringing together researchers, clinicians, and patient advocates. These funds will provide the opportunity to share my thesis research, learn from leaders in the field, and connect with and network with peer colleagues and potential postdoctoral mentors.



Paige Hall Ph.D. (2023/2024)

\$1,500 – Scientific Travel Epilepsy Conference

I have been accepted to give a presentation at the SLC6A1 Connect 2025 Symposium and additionally, my abstract has been accepted at the American Epilepsy Society conference, where I have the opportunity to present to hundreds of researchers studying epilepsy related disorders. This conference is attended by clinicians and researchers alike and will allow me to learn broader implications and current research on **epilepsy** across several disciplines.



Justin Dhindsa M.D. / Ph.D. (2024/2025)

\$7,570 - Glaucoma and irreversible blindness

Funding to characterize a novel in vitro model of human retinal development using single-cell multiomics. This knowledge will help us build better, more disease-relevant models of human retinal ganglion cells in the lab, which are essential for understanding **vision loss** and finding new ways to treat diseases like **glaucoma**.



Nicholas O'Brien M.D. / Ph.D. (2024/2025)

\$5,800 – Pediatric Liver Cancer

Funding for building a data analysis workstation to study the process of how tumor cells from **pediatric liver cancers** gain the ability to metastasize and spread to distant organs (e.g. the lungs).

BRASS Giving

**In Honor of Myra Wilson
Janet Hansen**

In Honor of Elsie Eckert
Dr. Huda Zoghbi
Lynn Kamin
Mary Ann and David McKiethan
Frank J. Elvin
Mr. and Mrs. Marcel Gremillion

In Honor of Dr. Isaac Brownell
Dr. William and Nancy Brownell

**In Honor of
Buck Bukowski Endowment**
Suzy Simons

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Sponsorship Chair Jody Merritt
Social Media / PR Chair Jacquie Baly
Membership Chair Daniel Irion

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Social Correspondent Robin Simon

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Scholar Selection & Research Grant Advisor Dr. Matthew Baker†

Scholar Selection Committee Edna Meyer Nelson†

Scholar Selection Committee Marcia Brown†

Member at Large Jo Ann Petersen

BRASS Baylor Liaison Dr. Huda Zoghbi

†Scholar Selection
Committee Member