

The Element

March 2025



▲ The 12th Annual Judi and Jack Johnson BRASS Super Star Day took place at The Houstonian Hotel on October 24. More than 120 guests came to celebrate this philanthropic couple at our BRASS Scholars Reception and helped welcome our 2024 BRASS Scholars into the BRASS family.



◀ Hershey Grace, Dr. Mike Mann, Carolyn Faulk, Ed McMahon and Judi Johnson enjoy the 2024 BRASS Holiday party at the Four Leaf Towers

inside

- ▶ 2024-2025 BRASS Scholars
Four Outstanding Scientists
- ▶ BRASS Events
Highlights and Photos
- ▶ BRASS Highlights
BRASS Scholar Dr. Carli Domenico Prepares



▲ Dr. James Bonar, Elsie Eckert and Peter VanDerlofske presented BRASS Scholar English Laserna PhD candidate, Kat Kabotianski MD/PhD candidate and Sharon Bright Amanya PhD candidate with framed certificates plus a \$500 award for being selected as the 2024 HLS&R Outstanding Community BRASS Scholars of the year. This award is in recognition of their outstanding service to the community, society, and humanity through their personal involvement and leadership.

A Message from the BRASS President

Dear BRASS Members and Supporters:

I'm happy to report that BRASS has kicked off 2025, our 30th anniversary year, in grand style. I hope you'll enjoy seeing and reading about some of the BRASS highlights and scholars' accomplishments that helped make 2024 both fun and memorable.

In September, the Scholarship Committee selected our four new 2024-2025 BRASS Scholars from a total of 32 applicants. They were officially welcomed into the BRASS family on October 24, at the annual Scholars' reception. This brings us to a total of 91 scholarships awarded since our founding in 1995. Please see page two for more about these four new impressive young scientists whose fields of research in genetics, neuroscience and cancer research, represent distinct areas of hope for the future of healthcare.

On December 3, more than 100 guests, scholars and their mentors gathered at the Four-Leaf Tower party room, arranged for by BRASS member **Chris Kase**, for our annual Holiday party. Guests graciously brought gift cards for all the scholars, which always adds fun and some shopping cheer to their holidays. A Big THANK YOU **Myra Wilson, Jo Ann Petersen, Sidney Faust** and **Don Jordan** for underwriting these events.

I'm excited to announce a new offering for our members, a personalized "Take a Lab Tour" experience. You'll see what our scholars' research endeavors entail, the labs where they work closely with their mentors to make it all come together and see for yourself the impact your donations have helped make possible in the world of research. Pick your favorite scholar or your favorite mentor or your favorite area of research...select a date, ask a friend to join you and we'll arrange for your very own personalized "Take a Lab Tour." Email me at brass@elsiesmithdesign.com for all the details for this exciting scientific journey.

Please join me in welcoming four new 2025-2026 BRASS Member Chairs, **Dr. Jacquie Baly, Membership/Social Media Chair; Daniel Irion, PR Chair; Dr. Verena Kalkhoff, Young Professional Group Chair; and Jody Merritt, Sponsorship Chair.** Their expertise, experience and enthusiasm promise to put BRASS on the social map of the Houston community!

Mark your calendars for May 6, for our annual Tea & Toddies fundraiser celebrating our 30-year Anniversary, hosted by **Elizabeth** and **Anthony DeLuca**. Look for your invitation to arrive in early April.

The BRASS Board and I are grateful for your continued support and belief in our mission, thank you.



▲ Elsie Eckert with Stella

~Elsie

BRASS New Scholar Spotlight

BRASS Welcomes Four New 2024-2025 Scholars



▲ **Justin Dhindsa**
Sidney Broadfoot Faust Scholar

Justin grew up in Reno, Nevada, after spending the first three years of his life in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He later moved to Durham, North Carolina, where he earned his Bachelor of Science in Biology from Duke University. During his undergraduate years, he researched diseases such as ALS, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, and spinocerebellar ataxia. A brief internship at Ionis

Pharmaceuticals further fueled his passion for translational research, inspiring him to pursue a career that combines individual patient care with laboratory research.

Justin spent a year at the Neurological Research Institute studying aging and neurodegenerative diseases before joining the Medical Scientist Training Program (MD/PhD) at Baylor College of Medicine in 2022. He recently began his PhD training in the Genetics & Genomics Graduate Program and plans to focus on resilience and regeneration of vital organs during aging. Using computational tools and bioinformatics, Justin aims to understand the mechanisms behind aging and regeneration.

Outside the lab, Justin is an avid soccer fan and player. He also enjoys running in Houston's parks, reading, cooking new recipes, and exploring the city's vibrant bar and restaurant scene.

Justin is honored to join the BRASS community, where he looks forward to contributing to innovative research, growing as a scientist, and forming new friendships in the Houston community.



▲ **Nicholas O'Brien**
Myra Brantum Wilson Scholar

Nicholas was born and raised in Keller, TX. After high school, he was recruited to play baseball at Columbia University in New York City. He played Division I baseball for two years before beginning his scientific career in research. Nicholas' first research experience was in a cancer biology lab using various techniques to study the mechanisms of how cells die. He worked in this area for two years until he

graduated in 2020 with a BA in biochemistry and honors in biological sciences. After graduating, Nicholas worked for 2 years in Frederick, MD at the National Cancer Institute in the Chemical Biology Laboratory. Here, he continued to develop his passion for cancer research and clinical investigation.

Nicholas came to Baylor in 2022 when he joined the Medical Scientist Training Program (MD/PhD). After completing two years of medical training, he began his PhD in the Development, Disease Models & Therapeutics (DDMT) graduate program. Here, he is interested in understanding the origin and development of pediatric cancers and using this knowledge to inform new treatment strategies.

Outside of the lab, Nicholas enjoys completing DIY home improvement projects with his partner as well as fostering dogs. Since moving to Houston, Nicholas and his partner have short- and long-term fostered three dogs. He also enjoys baking, and he has set out to master the art of the New York bagel.



▲ **Matthew Ehrenburg**
Don Sykora Scholar

Matt grew up in Florham Park, NJ. As the youngest of four multilingual boys, Matt became fascinated by how people communicate. His interest in languages led him to The College of Wooster, where he studied Communications Sciences and Disorders and Spanish. After graduation, Matt joined The Hearing and Balance Center at Johns Hopkins University as a vestibular technician and clinical researcher. Motivated by seeing the debilitating effects of vestibular diseases, he joined a basic neuroscience lab to understand how sensory disorders impact brain circuitry. He then completed a post-baccalaureate premedical program at The University of Virginia to finish the prerequisite science courses and decided to pursue a career as a physician-scientist. Matt joined the Medical Scientist Training Program (M.D./Ph.D.) at Baylor College of Medicine. After the initial first two years of medical training and an internship at NASA's Human Health and Performance Laboratory, Matt started his Ph.D., joining the Neuroscience Graduate Program. He aspires to use modern neuroscience techniques to advance our understanding and treatment of neuropsychiatric diseases to address the urgent need for more effective mental health care.

Matt enjoys spending time with his partner, friends, and family outside school and exploring Houston's restaurants and coffee shops. Like many transplanted New Jerseyans, he continues to search for the best pizza and bagels in town. He also likes to exercise and play soccer, although his collegiate career has long since ended.

Matt looks forward to joining the BRASS family and engaging with scholars, donors, and the greater Houston community.



▲ **Brandi Small**
Don D. Jordan Scholar

Brandi Small was raised in Morrisville, VT. She later moved to Daytona Beach, FL where she completed her undergraduate degree in Aerospace Physiology. Her interest in science and space was sparked when she was younger watching Star Trek with her father, and later added a focus studying cancer research after her brother was diagnosed with leukemia. She began her research career during her undergraduate training

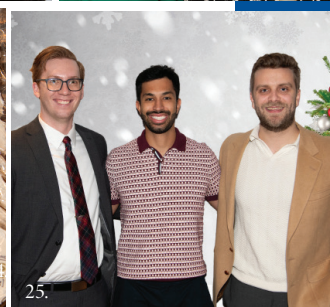
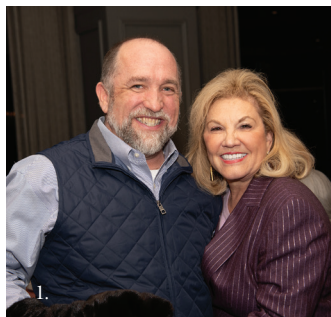
where she studied the gene regulation, growth pattern, and biofilm formation changes that occurred in bacteria exposed to simulated microgravity environments. She then went on to work for a year at Duke University in Durham, NC in the lab of Dr. Laura Wingler where she studied the G-protein coupled receptors AT1R, CCR7, and CCR2A. Brandi then decided to join Baylor College of Medicine in the Cancer and Cell Biology (CCB) PhD program. She hopes to be able to combine her interests in extreme environments and cancer into a single career field and honor her brother by finding better treatment options and prevention methods for cancer.

Outside of the lab, Brandi considers herself a jack of all trades, as she loves to be active and play sports, as well as read and embrace her Puerto Rican heritage through cooking and dancing.

Brandi is incredibly grateful for the opportunity to join BRASS and cannot wait to give back to her newfound community.

2024 BRASS Holiday Party

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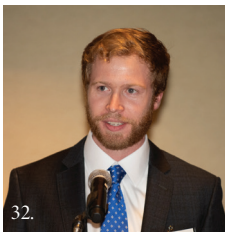
1. Kirk Kveton and Edna Meyer Nelson
2. James Craig, Dr. Jacquie Baly and Jody Merritt
3. Ed McMahon and Elsie Eckert
4. Dr. Susan Osterberg, Debra Laws and Beth Wolff
5. Dr. Mike Mann, Ed McMahon and Joni Baird
6. Kathleen and Tom Mach
7. Steve Brown, Dr. David Wright, Marcia Brown and Dr. Mike Mann
8. Dr. James and Tamara Klosz Bonar
9. Dionne Breen, Hershey Grace and Andy Delery
10. Linda Kuykendall and Daniel Irion
11. Dr. Matthew, Juliette and Amber Baker
12. Beth Wolff and Lenny Matuszewski
13. Dr. James Bonar and Michal Trylik
14. English Laserna and Jody Merritt
15. 21 BRASS Scholars enjoy the party
16. Debby Leighton and Mary Maxey



17. Dr. Fred Pereira and Dr. Peggy Goodell
18. Drs. Coralia and John Gomez
19. Craig Moffatt and Michele Collins
20. Jennifer Deger, Elsie Eckert, Michal Tyrlik and Joe Zoeller
21. Steve Spencer and Jody Merritt
22. Andy Delery and Mary Ann McKeithan
23. Linda and Carl Kuykendall
24. Special signature cookies courtesy of Carolyn Faulk
25. Matthew Ehrenburg, Justin Dhindsa and Nicholas O'Brien
26. Elizabeth and Anthony DeLuca
27. Beth Wolff, Mary Ann McKeithan and Mary Maxey
28. Vesna Southwick and Elsie Eckert
- PAGE 5
29. Kirk Kveton, Dr. Jacquie Baly and Beth Wolff
30. Edna Meyer Nelson, Suzanne Klein, Robin Simon, Dionne Breen, and Andy Delery
31. Judi Johnson and Jo Ann Petersen
32. Malcolm McDonald gives presentation
33. English Laserna gives presentation
34. Apoorva Thatavarty and Les Eckert
35. Elsie Eckert introduces new Scholar Brandi Small
36. Robin Simon introduces new Scholar Matthew Ehrenburg
37. Dr. James Bonar introduces new Scholar Justin Dhindsa
38. Edna Meyer Nelson introduces new Scholar Nicholas O'Brien
39. Linda Kuykendall, Tamara Klosz Bonar and Dionne Breen
40. Jack and Judi Johnson and Ed McMahon
41. Ed McMahon and Dr. Mike Mann
42. Suzanne Klein and Edna Meyer Nelson
43. Jacquie Baly, Elsie Eckert and Jody Merritt
44. Sharon Amany Bright and Les Eckert

Bolded names denote BRASS Scholars

2024 BRASS Scholar Reception



BRASS Celebrates 12th Annual Judi & Jack Johnson Day

On October 24, at our annual scholar's reception was held at the Houstonian Hotel and was generously underwritten by **Don Jordan, Myra Wilson, Jo Ann Petersen and Sidney Faust**. Our four 2024-2025 BRASS Scholars were welcomed to the BRASS family and introduced by BRASS Scholar selection committee members **Robin Simon, Edna Meyer Nelson, Elsie Eckert and Dr. James Bonar**. This event celebrates **Judi and Jack Johnson** and their continued generous research support through the Wintermann Foundation which, each year, provides 16 BRASS scholars in the Baylor College of Medicine Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, a \$5,000 stipend to help fund their research during years two to five of their graduate studies. Our scholars use these discretionary funds for research supplies, lab equipment, and other needed agents to perfect their research process. This year the Johnson's donated an additional million dollars to the fund, allowing us to increase the yearly stipend from \$3,000 to \$5,000. To date, the Wintermann Foundation has given more than \$3 million to help fund the significant accomplishments that are milestones in our BRASS scholars' research success. This BRASS scholar funding is also a tremendous asset to their lab mentors, because these extra funds bring much-needed support when there are not adequate resources available to help our scholars and their labs move forward with their research. **English Laserna** PhD candidate and **Malcolm McDonald** MD/PhD candidate both (2021-2022) scholars spoke about the impact of the financial support from the Wintermann Foundation and how profoundly it has advanced their research efforts and results.



BRASS Highlights

Dr. Carli Domenico, 2015 BRASS Scholar Prepares For a Journey to Mars



▲ *Carli Domenico*

NASA selected a crew of four volunteers to participate in a simulated journey to Mars inside a habitat at the agency's Johnson Space Center in Houston. BRASS Scholar Dr. Carli Domenico was one of the four to enter the ground-based HERA (Human Exploration Research Analog) facility on Friday, Jan. 26, 2024 to live and work like astronauts for 45 days during the simulated mission to the Red Planet. Crew members exited the facility on March 11, 2024, after their "return" to Earth. It was a 2 year process of being selected and trained with 15 days pre-data collection and 1 week post-data collection and debrief, involving 65 days of 16 hour work days. Without leaving Earth, HERA allows scientists to study how crew members adapt to the isolation, confinement, and work conditions astronauts will experience during future spaceflight missions. Crew members

conducted science, operational, and maintenance tasks while facing communication delays with the outside world lasting up to five minutes as they "approached" Mars. Domenico and her crew mates participated in 18 human health studies throughout the simulated mission. The experiments will be used to assess the psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses of crew members millions of miles away from their home planet.

Domenico is a neuroscientist from San Antonio, Texas, her doctorate here at Baylor College of Medicine involved the study of neural circuits in animal models from pigeons to rats for research that specialized in learning and memory. She has presented her work through talks at conferences, universities, and workshops, and has published in several journals. She applied last year for the next astronaut candidate class and is considering getting her pilot's license this year to up her future chance of being selected to become an astronaut and actually go to Mars.

Carli reflected, "the HERA mission was life-changing for me. It was an incredible digital-detox and mission simulation being in a 600 sq. ft. space with my family-crew of four. We had our own mission control surveilling us at all times and increasing communication delays as we got closer to Mars. I've never achieved such focus and flow-state collaborating as a team or working as an individual in my life. I learned a lot about myself, and it was a beautiful experience that made me feel empowered and confident that I have at least some of 'the right stuff', I love talking about this experience and could go on forever about it".

Carli and her husband Javi, are currently living in Madison, Wisconsin where he is a doctor working at the university doing both research and surgical cases and she is working remotely for Susan G Komen as a Science Communications Manager. Domenico is also an Education and Outreach director for the Center for Space Medicine Research (CSMR), which is a nonprofit out of Harvard and Mass-Gen Hospital. She recently received her certification as a yoga instructor. In her free time, she teaches at her community's aging center, where she volunteers by leading activities and delivering meals.



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[†]Scholar Selection Committee Member

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