

Dear BRASS Members and Friends,

In February 2020, fifteen BRASS Scholars and the executive board gathered at our home to welcome four new 2019-2020 BRASS Scholars. We shared an evening of mentoring, camaraderie and exciting details about all the upcoming fun events there were to look forward to in the months ahead...

Well, so much for the best laid plans.

Everyone has personal pandemic experiences that shaped and changed their lives in different ways. Loss and struggle were intertwined with many of them and our BRASS scholars were no exception. However, they met their challenges head-on and carried on: labs closed, experiments were lost, research came to a halt, funding was scarce and, for some, the eight to nine years spent working towards the goal of graduation culminated in a Zoom ceremony.

Yet, there were also special moments and memories: graduations, weddings, engagements, babies, dog adoptions, fellowship funding, and Match Day results which brought the exact desired outcome.

The pandemic pause to our 2020 events meant there were no event photos to capture and share with you in this newsletter. We are, however, delighted to dedicate this Spring 2021 edition to the very reason the BRASS organization was started...our BRASS Scholars, both past and present. We have featured some of their pandemic journeys and updated you on their prestigious accomplishments, including updates about two of our very first BRASS Scholars – Julia Elvin, who was selected 26 years ago and Isaac Brownell, selected 24 years ago. With great pride, I share the remarkable common thread which runs through all the BRASS Scholars' stories: their conviction to embrace life, stay focused, work hard and do so with determination and resilience.

In September, six scholar selection committee members met in a large Baylor College of Medicine lecture auditorium to select the new 2020-2021 BRASS Scholars. Masks on and spread far apart, we interviewed the 10 masked finalists selected from a very impressive slate of 41 applicants. Masks made communication and comprehension a bit challenging, but, once again, we are proud to welcome our four new exceptional scholars into the BRASS family. These outstanding student scientists – Mariah Berner, Ph.D.; Jennifer Deger, M.D./Ph.D.; Juan Romero, M.D./Ph.D.; and Sarah Waldvogel, M.D./Ph.D. – are highlighted in this issue.

BRASS extends a very special thanks to our founder, Myra Wilson, for her generous \$25,000 gift to kick off our Membership Donation Match Campaign. Myra generously matched all the funds that were donated to the campaign. A total of \$45,000 was raised for the biomedical research funding for our BRASS Scholars. Details of this successful campaign can be found inside on page five.

And, once again, a big round of applause goes to Ed McMahon for his unwavering belief in the BRASS mission. In December, he donated another \$12,000 to the Donald E. McMahon Research and Education Recruitment Endowment. This endowment has helped BRASS recruit some of the best and brightest student scientists to the BRASS program and has also funded many research requests for our BRASS scholars. Thank you, Ed, for your continued support. You are a true BRASS hero!

It's probably a safe bet that all of you were as happy as I was to shut the door on 2020 and gratefully step into the new year with renewed hope and the belief of better days to come. While it's taking a bit more time than we anticipated, I know we will soon be getting together as a BRASS family to once again celebrate the joy of being with friends.

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

~ Elsie Eckert
BRASS President



▲ Elsie Eckert with Stella

SAVE THE DATE
BRASS 25th Anniversary Celebration
Thursday, October 21, 2021
Invitations to Follow

BRASS Scholar Spotlight

BRASS welcomes Four New 2020-2021 Scholars



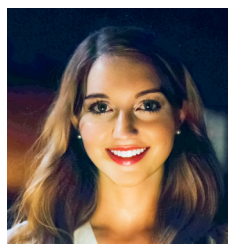
▲ **Mariah Berner**
*Myra Branum Wilson
Scholar*

Mariah Berner grew up in Duluth, Minnesota. Her experience with cancer sparked her interest in healthcare and the life sciences. She attended the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, and completed dual degrees in Biology, Society and Environment (B.A.) and psychology (B.S.), with a minor in Public Health. During that time, she was fortunate to work in several labs where she discovered her passion

for research. Following graduation, Berner worked as a research technician and lab manager at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital where she solidified her desire to pursue graduate school.

Mariah joined Baylor College of Medicine's Cancer and Cell Biology Ph.D. Program in summer 2020. Currently, she is interested in studying the mechanisms involved in metastasis and resistance to anticancer drugs. She is excited to learn and further develop her skills in asking the difficult questions and uncovering the underlying mechanisms to target cancer both efficiently and effectively.

Beyond the lab, Mariah enjoys climbing, running, biking, relaxing in a hammock at the park, or trying a new recipe in the kitchen. She plans to get involved in the Houston community, to discover and explore this city that is new to her. As a budding scientist, she believes it is important for scientists to not only be engaged in the work at the bench but also to be immersed in our society. She is honored to join the BRASS family and looks forward to learning from outstanding research mentors and studying alongside fellow trainees.



▲ **Jennifer Deger**
Don D. Sykora Scholar

Jennifer Deger is from Friendswood, Texas. She studied neuroscience and writing at UT Austin before coming to Baylor in 2018 when she joined the M.D./Ph.D. program.

The complexity of the human brain piqued her interest in high school and inspired her to pursue a degree in neuroscience. In college, she became interested in neurodegenerative diseases.

In medical school and graduate school, she is more intrigued everyday, and sometimes frustrated, by the mystery that is Alzheimer's disease.

She plans to continue asking questions about the pathogenesis of neurodegeneration, and hopefully provide some answers. After graduation, she plans to see patients with neurodegenerative diseases in the clinic, while studying therapeutic approaches to those diseases in the lab.

She volunteers at the Houston SPCA and Wildlife Center of Texas, where she enjoys birding. She also likes to read fiction. Steinbeck, Vonnegut, and Updike are among her favorite authors.

She's also peripherally interested in space exploration and cosmology. During college, she was part of a research team which created computer models of dark matter formation and other events in the early universe. Since then, she's been fascinated by how our universe formed and continues to change. She also enjoys spending time with friends and family and spoiling her three cats.



▲ **Juan Romero**
*Sidney Broadfoot
Faust Scholar*

Juan Romero was born in Colombia and immigrated with his family to New Jersey, where he discovered the wonder of science and inquiry. In his freshman year of high school, he joined the Waksman Student Scholars Program in collaboration with Rutgers University and, with his mentor, generated part of a DNA library of a bioremediatory plant known as duckweed. Later, he investigated tumor biology, and the role that a

cancer cell's external environment has on its ability to metastasize. At that time, he pursued biology degrees at both Middlesex Community College and Rutgers University.

Previous life experiences, including a bout with tuberculosis at a young age, inspired Romero to train as both a physician and a scientist. He feels grateful and fortunate for his acceptance into the M.D./Ph.D. dual degree program at Baylor College of Medicine, where he currently studies in the neuroscience graduate program. Juan relishes the opportunity to advance his research of disease and therapeutics.

A deep appreciation for acts of movement and physical strain inspire Romero to push himself as a runner, weight lifter and biker. Hiking with his partner of nearly a decade, Melissa Castro, is also a favorite past time. Juan loves the time he can spend with his family, and spurred by the pandemic, has started a discussion club where they talk about their favorite shows, books and movies. As a BRASS Scholar, Juan looks forward to the bonds that he will create with his new BRASS family.



▲ **Sarah Waldvogel**
Don D. Jordan Scholar

Sarah Waldvogel was born and raised in Clemson, S. C. She attended Clemson University and received dual B.S. degrees in biochemistry and genetics, with a minor in German Languages, in 2018. Throughout her time at Clemson, Sarah was fortunate to have several research experiences, including a four-year project studying the biochemistry of DNA repair proteins. She realized that she was fascinated by the pathophysiology of

disease and was most interested in synthesizing basic science with clinically relevant questions.

After graduating from Clemson, she joined the M.D./Ph.D. program at Baylor College of Medicine in 2018. She is a student in the Cancer and Cell Biology Graduate Program, where she hopes to research DNA repair and genomic instability, particularly as it relates to cancer initiation, progression, and therapeutics, as well as inherited cancer predisposition syndromes. She hopes to become an oncologist at an academic medical center, where she can both run her own research lab and treat patients in clinic.

In her free time, she enjoys outdoor activities, including running, hiking, and whitewater rafting. She is always looking for new coffee shops and restaurants. She also enjoys cheering for Houston's many sports teams and visiting museums and concert venues. She is excited for the opportunity that BRASS provides to become more involved in the Houston community.

BRASS Beginnings • Julia Elvin, MD/PhD, 1995-1996

Our First Brass Scholar



▲ Margaret M. Alkek,
Isaac Brownell, Julia Elvin

Julia Elvin got her start at Baylor College of Medicine when she was accepted to the Summer Medical and Research Training (SMART) Program, which is designed for undergraduate students who are interesting in exploring a career in scientific research. After that summer, she knew Baylor was where she belonged for her graduate work. She applied to the M.D./Ph.D program in the department of molecular and human genetics in 1994. Funding for basic scientific research was scarce, but she learned there was a group of Houstonians who wanted to support graduate students doing research through an organization known as BRASS.

“I couldn’t believe there was a group of non-medical citizens that specifically wanted to support us student scientists,” said Julia. “People were actually stepping forward to support us geeky graduate students who wanted to play with bacterialin the lab.”

BRASS members’ mentorship proved invaluable to this shy student who was afraid of public speaking, and helped her gain the skills and confidence to become a leader.

“Those skills have allowed me to take on the leadership role as director of women’s pathology in the company I work for, lecture to medical colleagues, and provide valuable health care education to the community,” Elvin said.

With more than 27 published papers, Julia is a leader in her field of research of rare cancers and targeting them with precision medicine. She is the **laboratory director and senior vice president of pathology and diagnostic medicine for Foundation Medicine**, a molecular information company with more than 6,100 employees, dedicated to a transformation in cancer care in which treatment is informed by a deep understanding of the genomic changes that contribute to each patient’s unique cancer. The company offers a full suite of comprehensive genomic profiling assays to identify the molecular alterations in a patient’s cancer and match them with relevant targeted therapies, immunotherapies and clinical trials. Elvin’s research is focused on comprehensive genomic profiling treatment for ovarian cancer.

Her overall average patient rating received a perfect 5.0 stars and, according to one patient, “Dr. Elvin is the perfect combination of profound knowledge, deep compassion, and the ability to translate the most complex concepts into understandable choices.”

She and her husband, Dr. David Elvin, an internal medicine and pediatrics physician, live in the Boston area and are parents of 17-year-old Elizabeth and 15-year-old Alex.

Our very first BRASS Scholar is the epitome of how impactful the dedicated support of the BRASS community has been and continues to be for the future of our BRASS Scholars and biomedical research.



BRASS Beginnings • Isaac Brownell, MD/PhD, 1997-1998



▲ Isaac Brownell and Myra Wilson

After graduating from Baylor College of Medicine, Isaac Brownell interned at Christus St. Joseph in Houston before completing a dermatology residency at New York University. A fellowship in stem cell biology at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center followed, where he was also on the clinical faculty.

In 2011, Isaac was recruited to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Md. where he joined the Dermatology Branch. he is now the **head of the cutaneous development and carcinogenesis section**, where he runs a research program studying skin stem cells and skin cancer. He considers himself very privileged to be an NIH investigator where he lives his dream of being a physician-scientist.

Brownell runs a research laboratory where they do basic and translational investigations, direct clinical trials developing new cancer treatments, and take care of patients at the NIH Clinical Center and at Walter Reed National Military

Medical center. He also trains future scientists and physicians at the Center.

He was honored to receive a 2018 Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Hubert H. Humphrey Award for Service to America in recognition for his role in getting accelerated FDA approval for a new cancer treatment. In 2019, he was elected to the American Society for Clinical Investigation (ASCI) and celebrated his 50th birthday.

“While proud of my numerous successes, I often think back on my days as a BRASS Scholar. I consider my experiences as a BRASS Scholar some of the most important, so I try to provide as much support to my trainees as BRASS provided to me. One of my most memorable BRASS experiences was being a part of the Squirrel Creek Ranch Cancer Retreats. I was involved in the initial planning of the early retreats, and I was especially fortunate to participate in the 50th retreat held at the ranch in October 2011. Twenty-five years is an amazing accomplishment and a testimonial to the dedication of the BRASS membership!”

► Isaac celebrating his 50th
birthday with his lab team.



BRASS Scholar Milestones

Defenses, Graduations and Residency Matching

What an amazing year it has been! Spring 2021 found eleven of our BRASS Scholars graduating and moving forward in their careers.



▲ **Lin Zhu, M.D./Ph.D.** (2013-14) with Dr. Michael Beauchamp, matched to Harvard Medical School, Mass General Brigham & Women's Hospital in pediatric medicine.



▲ **Jarey Wang, M.D./Ph.D.** (2014-15) with son Wesley matched to Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, MD in radiation oncology.



▲ **Joanne Hsu, M.D./Ph.D.** (2015-16) matched to Harvard Medical School, Mass General Brigham & Women's Hospital in internal medicine.



▲ **Amy Pohodich, M.D./Ph.D.** (2012-13) Amy and Dr. Reid Wilson at their wedding with Les & Elsie Eckert. Matched to Oregon Health & Science University - School of Medicine in ophthalmology.



▲ **Amanda Koire & Derrick Chu both M.D./Ph.D.** (2013-14) with their baby Maia, matched to Harvard Medical School, Boston Children's Hospital; Amanda in psychiatry and Derrick in pediatric medicine.



▲ **Paul Fahey, M.D./Ph.D.** (2014-15) will focus on his research in neuroscience and stay at Baylor in Dr. Andreas Tolias's lab.



▲ **Michael Lam, M.D./Ph.D.** (2016-17) matched to Harvard Medical School, Boston Children's Hospital in pediatric medicine.




▲ **Michael Gundry, M.D./Ph.D.** (2013-14) with his wife Yvette LeBlanc, matched to Harvard Medical School, Boston Children's Hospital in pediatric medicine.



▲ **Elizabeth Bowling, Ph.D.** (2015-16) Defended on January 11, 2021 and will remain in Houston to work with her current PI, Trey Westbrook, on research preparing for her eventual transition to a biotech company. Baby Abigail arrived on March 10.

INTEGRATIVE MOLECULAR AND BIOMEDICAL
SCIENCES GRADUATE PROGRAM

DISSERTATION DEFENSE

**Larissa Nitschke**

"Studies of ATXN1's
regulatory mechanisms"

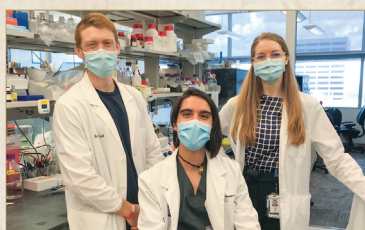
▲ **Larissa Nitschke, Ph.D.** (2014-15) Defended on October 5, 2020; she will be staying at Baylor as a postdoctoral fellow in the lab of Dr. Thomas Cooper (Matthew Pena's mentor, as well) to research pathology and immunology.

BRASS Member Spotlight

Myra Wilson matches all funds donated up to \$25,000

THANK YOU! Your generous donation to the BRASS Scholars research recovery effort to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 shutdown was a tremendous success! Your belief in BRASS helped us raise an amazing \$20,000 and not only was it matched by our founder, Myra Wilson, it was exceeded. She presented BRASS with the entire \$25,000 match goal.

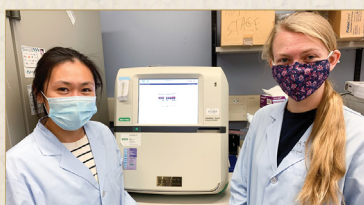
Thank you so much for being a part of this important campaign. These funds support the cutting-edge research of our BRASS Scholars and allow these brilliant scientists to continue advancing their efforts, leading to more cures, answers, and groundbreaking technology.



Patrick Hunt MD/PhD (2016-17), Juan Romero MD/PhD (2020-21),
Jennifer Deger MD/PhD (2020-21)



Kali Deans MD/PhD (2018-19), Zachary Criss PhD (2014-15)



Linda Zhang MD/PhD (2018-19), Sarah Waldvogel MD/PhD (2020-21)

Thank You

Generously Gifted By
BRASS

(Baylor Research Advocates for Student Scientists)
Founded 1995

All research equipment funded by your generous donations
display the above custom plaque.

Your Gifts Made a Difference

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Salute to Ed McMahon



Ed McMahon, president of the Donald E. McMahon Endowment Fund, generously presented BRASS with a check for \$12,000. He established this prestigious endowment to help fund the recruitment of physician scientist candidates for the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Baylor College of Medicine. This is the third donation he has made to the endowment since its inception in 2011. We are grateful to him for his ongoing support.

BRASS Remembrances

Celebrating the lives of Dr. William Brinkley & Don Faust, Sr.

With great sadness, we note the loss of two highly respected BRASS family members, Dr. William R. Brinkley and Don Faust. These two Influential founding members, were both an integral part of the success and growth of BRASS.

Dr. Brinkley, Dean of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences from 1991 to 2011, blessed the concept of BRASS in 1994. In 2007, the William R. Brinkley Endowed Chair became a funded reality. Bill never missed a BRASS event and was revered by BRASS members and BRASS Scholars alike.

Dr. Brinkley was a visionary with a brilliant mind, a terrific sense of humor and an outlook on life that was infectious – a true gentleman in every sense of the word. Without his vision, guidance and support, BRASS would never have come to fruition. What an amazing legacy he leaves behind!



▲ *Myra Wilson with Dr. William Brinkley in 1997*

Don Faust, Sr. and his wife Sidney, a founding member, were steadfast supporters of BRASS from the beginning. For 17 years, the Fausts opened their hearts and their Squirrel Creek Ranch for the Texas Children's Cancer Center patients and their families for weekend retreats. BRASS Scholars were selected as "Retreat Counselors" for each of the 75 retreats, helping all the patients and siblings take their minds off of their cancer treatments. These retreats greatly enhanced their lives and perspectives as researchers, future doctors and caregivers.

Don was an amazing soul, so kind, caring and generous; he and Sidney hosted and underwrote numerous BRASS events. A true gentleman of faith and absolute integrity, he was extremely successful, yet also humble and down to earth. Don touched countless lives in so many positive ways. He will be missed by all who knew him.



▲ *Les Eckert with Don Faust*

BRASS Scholar Highlights

Determined Initiative Garners NIH Fellowships



Kali Deans
MD/PhD(2018-19)



Sarah Herzog
MD/PhD(2018-19)



Andrea Ortiz
MD/PhD(2017-18)



Matthew Penna
MD/PhD(2018-19)

Four of our BRASS Scholars applied for and received F31 Fellowships, a competitive NIH fellowship for pre-doctoral students that covers tuition and a portion of their stipend as well as funding for their research. Each scholar had to write a grant that was centered around their current research projects. "These are the most competitive fellowships we can receive, so we are definitely excited," said BRASS Scholar Sarah Herzog.

BRASS Scholar Andrea Ortiz said, "My research has recently hit a few snags which has unfortunately slowed things down, but receiving this grant was very exciting and welcomed news. It has eased some of the stress that has come with the funding issues my lab is currently facing."

BRASS Scholar Mathew Penna said, "In the grant, I used figures I collected with BRASS support. For example, I purchased an antibody specific to the alternatively spliced isoform of Limch1 (I call the isoform mLimch1 for muscle-specific Limch1)."

A big congratulations goes to each of these four BRASS Scholars for their determined initiative to make career advancing things happen even in the toughest of times.

BRASS Officers 2020-2021

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