



The Element

March 2022



◀ The 2021 BRASS Scholars Reception and 9th Annual Judi and Jack Johnson BRASS Super Star Day was the perfect opportunity to visit one-on-one with the 20 BRASS scholars in attendance and welcome new Wintermann Foundation board members, Jeff Early and Randy Nelson.

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 Four Remarkable Scientists

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 BRASS Welcomes New Board Member Dr. Huda Zoghbi



▲ Myra Wilson and Dr. James Bonar introduced and welcomed the four 2020-2021 BRASS Scholars Mariah Berner, Sarah Waldvogel, Jennifer Deger, and Juan Romero at the November 11, Scholars Reception.



▲ Adding to the enjoyment of the Scholars reception, Peter VanDerlofske and Michele Collins introduced our four 2021-2022 scholars Malcolm McDonald, English Laserna, Apoorva Thatvarty, and Sharon Bright (not pictured).

A Message from the BRASS President

Dear BRASS Members and Friends,

Welcome to this new year of renewed hope for a very happy and healthy 2022.

BRASS begins 2022 with a very special thank you to the following donors for their unwavering continued support for our BRASS Scholars as they strive to make ground-breaking discoveries:

- **Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo** for their partnership with BRASS as they continue to provide funding for the Scholars' research equipment, their trips to seminars to present their lab findings, and funding to help support community outreach.
- **Jack and Judi Johnson** for contributing an additional \$50,000 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 complete their Ph.D. training.
- **Ed McMahon** for his contribution of \$20,000 to the Donald E. McMahon Research and Education Recruitment Endowment, which helps BRASS with recruitment of new scholars and also helps provide funding for their research.

We finished 2021 with several in-person events which lifted everyone's spirits:

- The Scholar's Reception finally gave us an opportunity to introduce our newest BRASS Scholars spanning from 2020 through 2022. Special thanks to the underwriters featured on page 5.
- The BRASS Scholarship Committee met in September and selected four outstanding student scientists from a total of 44 applicants and 10 interviews. These four accomplished 2021-2022 scholars are highlighted inside on page 2. We are thrilled to welcome them to the BRASS family!
- The BRASS Holiday Party on December 1 was, once again, graciously hosted and underwritten by Carolyn Faulk. More than 95 BRASS members, scholars, and their lab mentors were warmly welcomed to this fun and festive evening.

As always, the BRASS Board and I truly appreciate all of you for your continued support for BRASS and our amazing Scholars. Our 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!



▲ Elsie Eckert with Stella

~ Elsie

BRASS Scholar Spotlight

BRASS Welcomes Four New 2021-2022 Scholars



▲ **Sharon Bright Amany**
Don Sykora Scholar

a Bachelor of Science in nursing, after which she enrolled in a Master of Science in immunology and clinical microbiology program at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. During her masters, she was awarded a scholarship under the Microbiology and Immunology Training for HIV-related research in Uganda (MITHU), an National Institutes of Health Fogarty-funded program supporting the most promising young scientists in the fields of immunology and microbiology in Uganda.

Sharon was awarded a Fulbright foreign student scholarship to pursue a Ph.D. in Immunology and Microbiology program at Baylor College of Medicine with a research interest in virology. Africa lacks research scientists with the expertise needed to achieve sustainable disease control. Her ultimate goal is to become a leading virologist with expertise in therapeutics and vaccine development to address this unmet need.

Sharon loves to volunteer at community events, cook and try new food, and meet new people. She also enjoys outdoor activities including hiking and biking. She's excited to join the BRASS family and is already learning a lot about Houston from the BRASS community.

Sharon Bright Amany hails from Hoima district in Western Uganda. Often, disease outbreaks in Uganda claim far too many lives because of having limited diagnostics or therapeutics. She always felt a responsibility to be part of a solution and cultivated an interest in infectious diseases. To pursue her passion, she was awarded a government of Uganda merit scholarship to undertake



▲ **English Laserna**
Don D. Jordan Scholar

research, and she worked four years in a canine genetics laboratory studying congenital myasthenic syndrome in a family of Great Danes and diabetes mellitus susceptibility in American Eskimo Dogs.

English joined the Baylor College of Medicine graduate program this fall to pursue her Ph.D. in genetics & genomics. Being a member of this program allows her to immerse in translational medicine research with a broad range of topics, including development, endocrinology, stem cells, and therapeutics. She hopes to one day develop therapeutics or gene therapies for pressing health concerns.

Outside of Baylor, English spends a lot of time outdoors. She regularly plays volleyball and badminton with her peers or runs at Hermann Park. She also has a passion for cooking and trying new healthy recipes for her favorite desserts. English is very excited to live in Houston and spends almost every weekend visiting new places and finding great spots in the city. When the weather isn't so nice, she's home with her cat and reading a novel from her classic books collection. English is so honored to be a part of BRASS and the opportunities that await.

English Laserna was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina. She graduated from Clemson University in 2021, with degrees in biochemistry and biological sciences, with minors in genetics and microbiology. English was always interested in science, which she attributes to her mother, a marine biologist who showed her the beauty of nature from a young age. During her time at Clemson, she was fortunate enough to discover



▲ **Malcolm McDonald**
Sidney Broadfoot Faust Scholar

difficulties associated with treating it.

Malcolm joined the Baylor M.D./Ph.D. program in 2019. He is now a student in the Development, Disease Models, and Therapeutics graduate program, where he hopes to study how gliomas interact with the natural environment in the brain or functional connectivity within the brain. Malcolm is an aspiring neurosurgeon with the goal of seeing patients with neurological conditions like brain cancer, while studying their disease in the lab.

Outside of school, Malcolm is an avid runner and hiker. He also enjoys sampling Houston's many restaurants and breweries and trying his hand at cooking. Malcolm is an enthusiastic supporter of Duke basketball, the Dallas Cowboys and the Dallas Mavericks. Malcolm is excited about joining the BRASS family and looks forward to making new connections with its many members and supporters.

Malcolm McDonald was born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas. In high school, he became fascinated with the brain and chose to study neuroscience at Duke University. While at Duke, he began studying the Piezo ion channels and gravitated to the complexity and challenge of research. After graduating, he worked at MD Anderson Cancer Center studying glioblastoma therapeutics, where he saw firsthand the incredible toll brain cancer takes on a patients and the



▲ **Apoorva Thatavarty**
Myra Branum Wilson Scholar

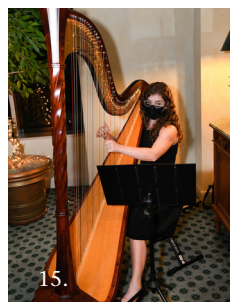
administration and economics.

Through her undergraduate career, followed by two years at the NIH as a post-baccalaureate research trainee, Apoorva began envisioning a career that encompassed both interpersonal and holistic aspects of medicine with the critical, hypothesis-driven nature of rigorous research. She is immensely grateful to be a part of the Baylor M.D./Ph.D. program pursuing her graduate studies in genetics. She is interested in exploring the genetic underpinnings of aging to develop therapeutics to extend quality of life.

Beyond academics, Apoorva enjoys hiking, planning elaborate potlucks and taking care of her houseplants and garden. She has always loved to cook and bake; but in 2020, she made a new year's resolution to do 52 bakes in 52 weeks. Among these bakes, she's made chocolate souffles, homemade pasta, baklava and, of course the pandemic classic, sourdough bread. She hopes to share these home bakes with the BRASS family and looks forward to giving back to the Houston community.

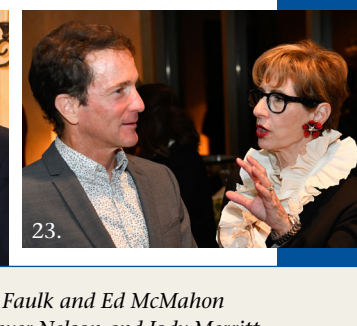
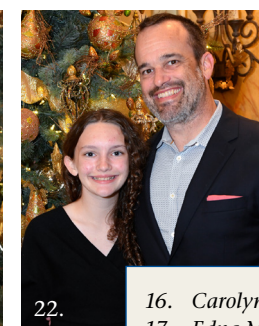
Apoorva Thatavarty is from is from Charlotte, North Carolina. Her interest in science and technology was nurtured from a young age. With an appreciation for the potentially unlimited power of technology and scientific discovery, she was fascinated by the notion of applying engineering concepts to the human body. These interests led her to pursue a Bachelor of Science in chemical and biomolecular engineering at North Carolina State University, with minors in business

2021 BRASS Holiday Party



1. Steve and Marcia Brown
2. Zachary & Keara Criss, Nikki Rosenberg and Elsie Eckert
3. Francois Marks and Peter VanDerlofske
4. Ashley Hayden, Dr. Rachel Avery, Edna Meyer Nelson and Carolyn Faulk
5. Ed McMahon, Chuck and Araly Simmons, Mary Ellen and Rod Crosby
6. Dean Carolyn Smith and Klys Reedyk
7. Judi and Jack Johnson
8. Jane and Bob Wise
9. Jo Ann Petersen and Apoorva Thatvarty
10. Cherry Whitley and Lenny Matuszewski
11. Drs. Cora and John Gomez
12. Dr. David Wright and Kenny Rogers
13. Special signature BRASS cookies courtesy of Carolyn Faulk
14. Dominique Armstrong, Lisa Chandler Rogers and Toyosi Adewunmi
15. A Harpist creates the perfect Holiday mood

2021 BRASS Holiday Party



16. Carolyn Faulk and Ed McMahon
17. Edna Meyer Nelson and Jody Merritt
18. Lisa and Dan Rogers
19. Myra Wilson, Elsie Eckert and Carolyn Faulk
20. Krista Defalco, Dr. Katherine King and Sharon Bright
21. Ed Smith
22. Lily and Dr. Matthew Baker
23. Michael Bickham and Linda Kuykendall
24. Stephanie Keeling and Malcolm McDonald
25. Elsie Eckert and Marcia Brown
26. Vicki Mercado and Matt Evans

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1. Jo Ann Petersen, Elsie Eckert and Dr. Shelly Buffington (2007-2008 BRASS Scholar)
2. Tamara Klosz Bonar and Dr. James Bonar
3. Michelle Collins and BRASS Scholars
4. Judi and Jack Johnson, Randy Nelson, Jeff Early and 21 BRASS Scholars
5. Marcia and Steve Brown, Kenny Rogers and Dr. David Wright
6. Carolyn Faulk, Ed McMahon, Robin Simon and Myra Wilson
7. Jeanie and Marshall Smith
8. Steve and Marcia Brown
9. Michele Collins and Craig Moffatt
10. Dr. Fred and Tracy Pereira
11. Elsie Eckert and Ed McMahon
12. Stephen Hicks, Sarah Herzog, Ashley Hayden and Raymond Monahan
13. Judi and Jack Johnson
14. Linda Zhang, John Baik and Les Eckert

2021 BRASS Scholar Reception



BRASS Celebrates 9th Annual Judi & Jack Johnson Day

On November 11, eight new BRASS Scholars were formally introduced to the BRASS family. They were welcomed by 93 guests at this annual event hosted by Jo Ann Petersen at the Montebello Highrise. It was generously underwritten by BRASS members Jo Ann Petersen, Myra Wilson, Ed McMahon, Don Jordan, Lisa Chandler, and Linda Kuykendall.

We welcomed our four 2020-2021 BRASS scholars Mariah Berner, Ph.D.; Jennifer Deger, M.D./Ph.D.; Juan Romero, M.D./Ph.D.; and Sarah Waldvogel M.D./Ph.D. along with our four 2021-2022 scholars Sharon Bright Amany, PhD; English Laserna, Ph.D.; Malcolm McDonald, M.D./Ph.D.; and Apoorva Thatvarty M.D./Ph.D.—all candidates for these degrees. Scholar selection committee members, Dr. James Bonar, Michele Collins, Peter VanDerlofske and Myra Wilson handled the introductions.

This event celebrates both the scholars and Judi and Jack Johnson for their continued generous research support through the Wintermann Foundation which, each year, provides our 16 BRASS scholars in the Baylor College of Medicine Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences a \$3,000 stipend to help fund their research during years two to five of their graduate studies. Scholars use these discretionary funds for research supplies, lab equipment, and other needed agents to perfect their research process.

BRASS Scholars (2018-2019) Sarah Herzog, Ph.D. candidate and Linda Zhang, M.D./Ph.D. candidate, spoke of the impact this financial support from the Wintermann foundation has provided and how profoundly it has advanced their research efforts and results.

Myra Wilson and Ed McMahon presented a certificate and \$500 award with congratulations to BRASS scholars Sarah Herzog, Linda Zhang, Dominique Armstrong, and Matthew Penna for being honored as the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo 2021 Outstanding Community Leaders.



BRASS Highlights

We Welcome Huda Zoghbi, M.D. to the BRASS Board as our Baylor College of Medicine Liason



Dr. Huda Y. Zoghbi is Distinguished Service Professor at Baylor College of Medicine in the Departments of Molecular and Human Genetics, Pediatrics, Neurology, and Neuroscience; Investigator with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute; and founding Director of the Jan and Dan Duncan Neurological Research Institute at Texas Children's Hospital.

Dr. Zoghbi graduated with distinction from the American University of Beirut. She went on to her first year of medical school at American University of Beirut, but due to the civil war in Lebanon, she moved to the U.S. and received her medical degree from Meharry Medical College. She joined Baylor College of Medicine for her residency and subsequently obtained additional training in molecular genetics.

Dr. Zoghbi's expertise ranges from neurodevelopment to neurodegeneration. She and Dr. Harry Orr discovered that Spinocerebellar Ataxia type 1 is caused by expansion of a polyglutamine tract. Her subsequent studies demonstrating that such

expansion leads to accumulation of the mutant protein in neurons has had profound ramifications since many late-onset neurological disorders involve similar accumulations of disease-driving proteins. Her work in neurodevelopment led to the discovery of the gene *Math1/Atoh1* and showed that it governs the development of several components of the proprioceptive, balance, hearing, vestibular, and breathing pathways. She also discovered that mutations in *MECP2* cause the postnatal neurological disorder Rett syndrome and revealed the importance of this gene for various neuropsychiatric features.

Dr. Zoghbi has trained over 100 scientists and physician-scientists including several BRASS scholars. Dr. Zoghbi's dedication and commitment to Baylor's mission is palpable. She has been committed to educating the next generation of scientists and to creating collaborative opportunities. She is a member of multiple professional organizations and boards. She has been elected to the National Academy of Medicine, the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has honorary degrees from Harvard University, the University of Massachusetts, and Yale University. Dr. Zoghbi's honors include the Pearl Meister Greengard Prize from Rockefeller University; the Shaw Prize in Life Science and Medicine; the Breakthrough Prize in Life Sciences; the Canada Gairdner International Prize; the Victor A. McKusick Leadership Award from the American Society of Human Genetics; the Citation Laureate by Web of Science; and the Lundbeck Foundation's 2020 Brain Prize. The BRASS family is honored to welcome this world renowned doctor to the BRASS Board as our Baylor College of Medicine Liason/Mentor.

BRASS Scholars Receive Awards

▼ *BRASS Scholar (2018-2019) Sarah Herzog, Ph.D. candidate (below) spoke at the scholar's reception about how impactful the financial support provided by the Wintermann Foundation has been to her research's advancement and results. Linda Zhang, M.D./Ph.D. candidate (2018-2019) also shared her gratitude for the Foundation's support.*



◀ *Ed McMahon presented Dominique Armstrong, Kali Deans, Linda Zhang, and Sarah Herzog with framed certificates and a \$500 award for being selected as the 2021 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.*

BRASS Officers 2021-2022

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President *Elsie Eckert*
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Research Award Liaison *Ed McMahon*
Scholar Liaison *Elsie Eckert and Peter VanDerlofske*
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BCM Liaison/Mentor *Dr. Huda Zoghbi*

You have the right to decline future education and development communications. If you do not want us to contact you for our fundraising efforts, please contact the Office of Philanthropy and Alumni Relations at 713.798.4714 or optout-development@bcm.edu.

BRASS Giving

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