

# The Element

June 2020



▲ Don Jordan presented Patrick Hunt, Joanne Hsu and Zachary Kadow with certificates and a \$500 award for being honored as the HLS&R 2019 Outstanding Community BRASS Scholars. Elizabeth Bowling was honored, as well, but unable to attend the annual Scholars' Reception.



▲ Myra Wilson and Elsie Eckert welcomed the new Dean of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Dr. Carolyn Smith and her husband Klys Reedyk, to the 2019 BRASS holiday party.

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Awards & Achievements



▲ Stunning a surroundings, a sumptuous buffet, a live band and specialized coffee bar all graciously welcomed guests to the 2019 BRASS Scholars Reception at Dr. Kelly Larkin and Fernando Parra's home.

## A Message from the BRASS President

Dear BRASS members and supporters:

I hope and trust you and your families are safe and well during these turbulent times. It's difficult to believe the impact this pandemic has had in reshaping our lives. For BRASS, it's been a humbling and reflective time, even as we proudly acknowledged the achievement of a 25 year milestone. And, while our 25th anniversary celebration, like so many other things, will need to wait until 2021, I hope you'll enjoy and be encouraged by some of these BRASS highlights and scholars' accomplishments that helped make 2019 both fun and memorable.

In September, the Scholarship Committee selected, from a total of 32 applicants, our four new 2019-2020 BRASS Scholars: Ashley Hayden, Chiraag Kapadia, Vicki Mercado and Rowland Pettit. Each of these outstanding student scientists is highlighted inside on page two. They were officially welcomed into the BRASS family in grand style on October 17, at the Scholars' Reception, underwritten by and hosted in the spectacular home of Dr. Kelly Larkin and Fernando Parra.

On December 1, the annual BRASS Holiday Party was once again graciously hosted and underwritten by Carolyn Faulk. This highly anticipated, festive celebration welcomed more than 90 BRASS members, guests, scholars and their lab mentors. Over 45 gift cards were brought by guests and distributed to each of the BRASS scholars, an unexpected holiday gift, lending some special fun and cheer to their holidays.

February 2, Super Bowl Sunday, found us at the home of Jeanie and Marshall Smith, where 42 scholars, spouses, friends and BRASS members all cheered, ate heartily, and thoroughly enjoyed this fun gathering of friends. A big thank you to Jeanie and Marshall for graciously hosting this event every year.

Sadly, all 2020 BRASS events have been canceled; though we are unable to get together to celebrate and applaud the many achievements of our BRASS Scholars, the spirit of our mission continues to grow and reveal itself in remarkable ways. Thanks to your continued support, research to find cures and unlock answers that will benefit and improve our lives continues on with great passion and determination by each of our BRASS scholars. The BRASS board and I are extremely grateful for your unwavering dedication, ongoing compassion, and the financial support you provide for our scholars. Never have I been so proud to be a part of the BRASS family alongside all of you—not apart, but six feet close.

~ Elsie



▲ Elsie Eckert with Stella

# BRASS Scholar Spotlight

## BRASS Welcomes Four New 2019-2020 Scholars



▲ **Ashley Hayden**  
*Sidney Broadfoot  
Faust Scholar*

In her free time, Ashley enjoys walking and hiking, taking Zumba classes, reading true crime novels, and painting. Ashley also loves to travel and hopes to have more opportunities to do so over the next several years. As a first-generation college student, Ashley understands just how critical support is for student success and is grateful to the BRASS organization for their unwavering resolve to help students like her succeed.

Ashley began her research journey in 2017, where she studied the genetic mechanisms behind monarch butterfly migration. She also performed research on newly discovered bacteriophages as potential therapeutics for bacterial-resistant infections. Ashley graduated in May 2019 from Texas A&M with a B.S. in honors biology. She solidified her love for research and decided to pursue a PhD in Neuroscience.

In her free time, Ashley enjoys walking and hiking, taking Zumba classes, reading true crime novels, and painting. Ashley also loves to travel and hopes to have more opportunities to do so over the next several years. As a first-generation college student, Ashley understands just how critical support is for student success and is grateful to the BRASS organization for their unwavering resolve to help students like her succeed.

Ashley Hayden was born and raised in Friendswood, Texas, a suburb just outside of Houston. Growing up, Ashley had a passion for helping others, which led her to pursue a premedical degree from Texas A&M University. However, come college, she was surprised by how much she loved her basic science classes. Through a tutoring program, she also discovered her incredible passion for teaching and mentoring others. As a result, she decided to pursue a career of academic research. Ashley wanted to become a professor where she could not only teach the next generation, but also be on the cutting edge of science and potentially help others with her discoveries.



▲ **Chiraag Kapadia**  
*Don D. Sykora Scholar*

Chiraag is now an MD/PhD candidate in the Cancer and Cell Biology graduate program. Within the realm of cancer biology, he is interested in studying the tumor microenvironment, aging and metastasis. He is excited to utilize emerging cutting-edge technologies to better and broader interrogate cancer evolution and translate those findings to more effective treatments for patients.

When not in the lab, Chiraag finds happiness in maintaining a vegetable garden on the roof-terrace of his home. He is also a budding climber and enjoys going to the climbing gym. Finally, he enjoys sampling the delicious restaurants, unique bars, and craft breweries contained within Houston. Chiraag is honored to be welcomed into the BRASS family and is excited share his love of biomedical research with fellow BRASS members.

Chiraag Kapadia grew up in the rural Kentucky town of Madisonville, Kentucky. He attended Washington University in St. Louis and double-majored in biology and computer science. His initial interest in biomedical research was sparked during high school, during a project investigating viruses that infect bacteria. While in college however, he became fascinated with the persistent problem posed by cancer and joined the lab of Dr. Vivek Arora, where he studied the mechanism of a mutation that causes bladder cancer. Realizing his desire to both treat patients with cancer and study the disease experimentally, he decided to pursue the physician-scientist career path.



▲ **Rowland Pettit**  
*Myra Branum  
Wilson Scholar*

After completing three years as a Baylor College of Medicine MD student, Rowland joined the Medical Scientist Training Program this summer. He is pursuing a PhD in Quantitative and Computational Biosciences, and his interests include machine learning, statistical methods and data science. Rowland will utilize his time in graduate school to obtain both the technical knowledge base and the research skill set to become an effective physician scientist.

Outside of academics Rowland enjoys investing in his community and beyond, serving on multiple trips to install clean water wells in rural regions of Costa Rica with Agua Viva Serves. He encourages friends to join him for a daily workout and stays active playing sports. He's challenged himself by shark cage diving in South Africa, riding a bull in Texas, and bungee jumping in Costa Rica.

Rowland serves as a medical student representative at the state level on the Texas Medical Association's Council of Science and Public Health. Rowland is honored to be able to join the BRASS family and is very excited to advocate for scientific research!

Rowland Pettit grew up in Maitland, FL before moving to Fort Worth, TX for high school. He played Men's Lacrosse at Duke University and won back to back National Championships with the team in 2013 and 2014. At Duke, Rowland earned a Biophysics undergraduate degree. While at Baylor College of Medicine, his research endeavors led him to discover the exciting new applications of artificial intelligence for medical problems which led him to seek additional education with formal PhD training.



▲ **Vicki Mercado**  
*Don D. Jordan  
Scholar*

Vicki is now a first-year graduate student in the Immunology & Microbiology graduate program at Baylor. She is excited to build her expertise in understanding the beautifully complex immune system, its shortcomings, and how we can harness its strengths to improve medical therapies for difficult-to-treat diseases.

In her free time, Vicki enjoys traveling, board game nights, outdoor activities, and photography. Moving to Houston has made it easy for her to nurture her interest in diversity, nature, and culture. She has recently made a habit of rescuing animals and her home is now blessed with the joy of two cats and two dogs. Vicki is incredibly grateful to join the BRASS family and is excited to make lifelong connections, share her passion for science, and give back to the Houston community.

Vicki Mercado was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. She attended Whittier College and graduated summa cum laude with a BA in biology and a minor in psychology. At Whittier, she enjoyed learning about human health and behavior. She shared her knowledge through peer tutoring and mentoring first-year students as a residential advisor. Encouraged to spend a summer doing research, ultimately sparked her interest in scientific investigation. Through several internships, she grew increasingly fascinated by the idea of a dual career in science and medicine. A two-year research program at the University of Pennsylvania confirmed her commitment to becoming a physician-scientist and led her to Baylor College of Medicine's MD/PhD program.

Vicki Mercado was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. She attended Whittier College and graduated summa cum laude with a BA in biology and a minor in psychology. At Whittier, she enjoyed learning about human health and behavior. She shared her knowledge through peer tutoring and mentoring first-year students as a residential advisor. Encouraged to spend a summer doing research, ultimately sparked her interest in scientific investigation. Through several internships, she grew increasingly fascinated by the idea of a dual career in science and medicine. A two-year research program at the University of Pennsylvania confirmed her commitment to becoming a physician-scientist and led her to Baylor College of Medicine's MD/PhD program.

# 2019 BRASS Holiday Party



1. Judi Johnson and Chiraag Kapadia
2. Eric Bradley, Wanderson Rezende and Francoise Marks
3. Dr. David Wright, Elsie Eckert and Linda Kuykendall
4. Lisa and Michael O'Leary
5. Harry and Cora Sue Mach, Judi and Jack Johnson
6. Michele Collins and Craig Moffatt
7. Jo Ann Petersen, Ed McMahon and Lisa Chandler
8. Myra Wilson and Cody Bowman
9. Elsie Eckert, Robin Simon, Tamara Klosz Bonar and Chris Case
10. Donna and Robert Stokes and Sidney Faust
11. Dr. Jim Bonar and Tamara Klosz Bonar
12. Dr. Tuan Chao, Les Eckert and Dr. Mingshan Xue
13. Marsha and Steve Brown
14. Ed McMahon and Carolyn Faulk
15. BRASS Scholars enjoying the party
16. Lenny Matuzewski and Linda Kuykendall

# 2019 BRASS Scholar Reception



1. Elsie Eckert, Robin Simon and Dr. Kelly Larkin
2. Matt Evans and Marshall Smith
3. Dr. Kelly Larkin and Fernando Parra
4. Joanne Hsu, Chiraag Kapadia, Don Jordan, Patrick Hunt and Myra Wilson
5. Desserts "To Die For"
6. Kali Deans and Chandler Fielder
7. Zach Criss and son Tre with Dean Carolyn Smith
8. Hershey Grace, Dr. Jim Bonar and Carli Domenico
9. Myra Wilson, Ed McMahon and Hershey Grace
10. Craig Moffatt, Linda and Carl Kuykendall
11. Myra Wilson, Dean Carolyn Smith and Don Jordan

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12. Lin Zhu, Ashley Hayden, Carli Domenico and Myra Wilson
13. Krista Defalco, Elsie Eckert, Steve and Marsha Brown, and Dr. Kelly Larkin
14. Ed McMahon and BRASS Scholars
15. Fernando Parra and Patrick Hunt
16. Vicki Mercado and Steve Brown
17. Chiraag Kapadia and Michele Collins
18. Myra Wilson and Rowland Pettit
19. Ashley Hayden and Dr. Jim Bonar
20. Rowland Pettit, Vicki Mercado, Ashley Hayden and Chiraag Kapadia
21. Dean Carolyn Smith and Elsie Eckert
22. Andrea Ortiz
23. Dominique Armstrong

## BRASS Celebrates 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Judi & Jack Johnson Day

On October 17, our four new 2019-2020 BRASS scholars Ashley Hayden PhD, Chiraag Kapadia MD/PhD, Vicki Mercado MD/PhD, and Rowland Pettit MD/PhD were introduced by BRASS Scholar selection committee members, Dr. James Bonar, Michele Collins, Steve Brown and Myra Wilson respectively.

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 2-5 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 (2017-2018) Dominique Armstrong PhD and Andrea Ortiz PhD spoke of the impact of this financial support from the Wintermann foundation and how profoundly it has advanced their research efforts and results.

Don Jordan presented a \$500 award with congratulations to BRASS scholars Elizabeth Bowling, Patrick Hunt, Joanne Hsu and Zachary Kadow for being honored as the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo 2019 Outstanding Community Leaders.

Ed McMahon surprised each of the 16 BRASS scholars with a \$500 check and the only stipulation was "spend it on anything you need."

Dr. Carolyn Smith, the new Dean of Baylor College of Medicine Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences was introduced and warmly welcomed to the BRASS family.



# BRASS Highlights

## BRASS Scholars' Research and COVID-19 — they cope, adapt and move forward

**B**aylor College of Medicine campus closed in mid-March including all the labs, with the exception of those working on COVID-19 vaccines or data. BRASS Scholars' research requiring a physical lab setting to move forward with their experiments was suspended. During this time, they all faced varied challenges: one lost all her mice and thus her experiment findings; some had their PhD defenses delayed; a few were permitted to stay in their labs to work on COVID-19 research; and some published papers. Others fostered and adopted dogs, grew gardens and even got married. All of them continued working on their laptops from home. The one common thread throughout all of it was their unwavering passion to get back in the lab and move forward with their research. On June 1, a phased reopening of labs was happily welcomed. Admirably every scholar has remained optimistic and without fail each shared with me how much they missed interacting with the BRASS family. Please enjoy a glimpse into just a few of the BRASS scholars' days during the shutdown:

**Michael Gundry MD/ PhD (2013-14)** I graduated from Baylor in May, but before leaving to begin my residency at Boston Children's Hospital, I was granted access to continue my work in Dr. Margaret Goodell's Lab, working on **COVID-19 testing** with other Baylor investigators.

**Wanderson Rezende PhD (2015-16)** I stayed actively involved, doing research in my lab which was designated to do **COVID-19 diagnostic testing** for all Baylor of College Medicine Hospitals and affiliated institutions. We are compiling data to further understand the virus spread and help in the development of future treatments.

**Kristyn Hoffman PhD (2016-17)** My tropical med lab transitioned everyone to work on the **COVID-19 vaccine**. I worked on the backup animal crew for testing the vaccine in mice. We progressed with a SARS-1 vaccine, now being adapted to SARS-2/COVID-19. This is a joint effort between Baylor and Texas Children's Vaccine Development. I developed the decontamination and social distance policy for the astronaut training for NASA, which they have been implementing since the launches have been delayed.

**Carli Domenico PhD (2016-17)** When my lab closed, I had to **sacrifice my animals and experiments**. I'd been training them since February, so I lost several months of work. Fortunately, I did have full access to my lab computer and plenty of data to analyze, which allowed me to almost finish the publication, I originally, planned to submit in April. Unfortunately, the experiments lost during the shutdown were for its completion, so I am unable to submit until I train and perform surgery on two more animals. The only hold up now is my lab still cannot order new rats for experiments, ours and many other labs are suffering financially at this point, but I am keeping the faith I will be able to start again soon.

**Kali Deans MD/PhD (2018-19)** My lab has recently been approved to study the effects of **COVID-19 on the intestine**, and I have volunteered to assist with this project. I submitted my fellowship grant application at the beginning of April and have been preparing to write a review article on my thesis topic. I started an online course in Leadership and Management to further my professional development. My dog, Honey, has been terrific company.



▲ Larissa Nitschke and Walid were married.



▲ Ashley Hayden adopted an adorable puppy.



▲ Chiraag Kapadia cultivated his rooftop garden.



▲ Elizabeth Bowling is back in her lab.

## BRASS Officers 2019-2020

Founder *Myra Wilson*

President *Elsie Eckert*

Vice President *Dr. James Bonar*

Treasurer *Lisa Chandler*

Event Chair *Linda Kuykendall*

Second Vice President *Don D. Jordan*

2018 Scholar Selection Chair *Steve Brown*

Scholar Selection Committee Member *Michele Collins*

New 2020 Scholar Selection Committee Member *Peter VanDerlofske*

Recording Secretary *Jo Ann Petersen*

Research Award Liaison *Ed McMahon*

Scholar Liaison *Elsie Eckert*

Mentor Liaison *Dr. Jim Bocell*

Baylor Liaison *Dr. Matthew Baker*

## Donate Your 2020 Membership

**HELP OUR BRASS SCHOLARS' RESEARCH RECOVER FROM THE IMPACT OF COVID-19**

All BRASS 2020 events have been cancelled, including our only fundraiser, Tea & Toddies.

Decreased funding threatens the research aid BRASS provides our scholars.

Your membership is more important than ever.

To jump-start this donation fund, Myra Wilson is generously matching the first \$25,000.

Please consider donating your 2020 membership. (see enclosed donation card for details)

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](mailto:optout-development@bcm.edu).

## BRASS Giving

**Suzu Simons**

*In Memory of Bill Crassas*

*In Honor of Elsie Eckert*

*Both for the Buck Bukowski BRASS Travel Endowment*

**Myra Wilson**

*In Memory of Bill Crassas*