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From the editors:

Many things are plaguing our world right now, including the viral pandemic, civil rights protests, political fires, and now even literal fires. Many of us are afraid things will get worse before they get better, but the actions we take now will actively shape our future. We would like to acknowledge all the hard work that Hani Harb and Ari Tabaac, our former co-presidents, have put into guiding us through the confusing times at the beginning of the pandemic. Their leadership kept us up and running, and we are excited to announce new events and opportunities with you all very soon!



To submit comments, articles, or ideas for future newsletters, please contact: [Postdoc-publicaffairs@childrens.harvard.edu](mailto:Postdoc-publicaffairs@childrens.harvard.edu). For more information on the postdoc association, find us at:

**Childrens.org**  
**Facebook LinkedIn**

**Addressing racism in academic research**

by Sreya Ghosh, Ari Tabaac, Sarah Ducamp, Julie Sesen, Kimberly Wong

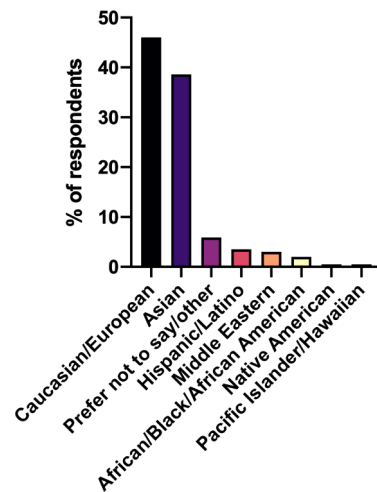
Besides the spread of COVID-19, the world has been marked by the strong protests of the Black community in response to the **Black Lives Matter** movement and the systemic racism and biases existing in numerous trades, and also in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Black and African American students are historically underrepresented in academia, which motivated Black scientists and colleagues to fight for justice, inclusion and equity in science in the streets and on social media.

Studies from 2017 found that Black and African American students represented **14% of all undergraduate students** (compared to 55% for White students), yet only **6% of faculty positions** (versus 76% for White scientists)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, although making up 14% of the total population in the US, Black and African American students represent only 9% of science bachelor degrees and 3.9% of engineering degrees.

In the 2018 and 2019 PDA Annual Surveys, we observed the same trend in the percentage of Black/African American postdocs compared to White and Asian postdocs. We found Black postdocs make up 2% of our postdocs versus 45% for White/Caucasian and 40% for Asian postdocs.

Further studies find that Black scientists are less acknowledged by their peers than White scientists. A recent study published in April, observed that PhD students from underrepresented communities have more innovative dissertations than majority students but this leads to lower impact<sup>3</sup>. Another NIH study from last October showed that there is a notable "funding gap" between Black and White researchers. In addition to a lower application rate, Black applicants receive 50% less R01 funding than White applicants<sup>4</sup>.

(Continued on page 2)



2019 Annual Survey data showing the representation of different ethnicities in our postdoc community.

For more information about **#BlackinSTEM** and spotlights on Black scientists, check out these hashtags:  
**#BLM #BlackintheIvory #Strike4BlackLives #ShutDownSTEM #BlackinChem #BlackinNeuro #BlackinGenetics #BlackinImmuno #BlackinMicro ...and more!**



**Election results are in!**

In August, the PDA board held elections for our executive leadership positions, and we are pleased to welcome two new Co-Presidents, **Kimberly Wong** and **Sreya Ghosh**! Go to page 9 to read our postdoc spotlight to learn more about them!

After the June protests, multiple journals gave the floor to Black scientists to speak about the impact of racism and discrimination in their career but also their vision for the future in STEM<sup>5</sup>. In this newsletter, we spoke to three successful scientists in the Longwood area and asked them about their journey and how they are fighting for diversity and inclusion in academia.

1. [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/31/us-college-faculty-student-diversity/](https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/31/us-college-faculty-student-diversity/)
2. [nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf19304/digest/field-of-degree-minorities#blacks-or-african-americans](https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf19304/digest/field-of-degree-minorities#blacks-or-african-americans)
3. [pnas.org/content/117/17/9284](https://pnas.org/content/117/17/9284)
4. [nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2019/10/10/delving-further-into-the-funding-gap-between-white-and-black-researchers/](https://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2019/10/10/delving-further-into-the-funding-gap-between-white-and-black-researchers/)
5. [nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01883-8](https://nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01883-8)

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### Frankie Heyward, Ph.D.

Postdoctoral Fellow at Beth Israel Deaconess and Founder and Chair of the HMS Black Postdoc Association (@HMSBPA)

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*@frankiedheyward*



#### *What is your background? Your topic of research?*

I'm the son of a retired police chief inspector and a retired psychiatric medical assistant, and grew up in a two culturally distinct environments, with one foot in the East Oak Lane section of Philadelphia and another in its abutting suburb, Cheltenham. My family can trace our roots back several generations to the old south. While a psych major at Univ. of Delaware, auditing a lecture on the molecular basis of hippocampal long-term potentiation piqued my interest in neurobiology and, afterwards I picked up a biology major before heading south of the Mason-Dixon line to work with a leader in the field of neuroepigenetics at the time, Dr. David Sweatt, while earning my PhD in Neurobiology. During my thesis project I studied the transcriptional and epigenetic basis of obesity-induced cognitive impairment, something I was drawn to, in part, due to the prevalence of obesity and type-2 diabetes in my community. I'm currently completing my postdoctoral training with Dr. Evan D. Rosen, the Chair of the Endocrinology division at Beth Israel Deaconess. Although Evan's group largely studies the transcriptional basis of adipocyte metabolic dysregulation during obesity, I've been fortunate to have the opportunity to leverage my neurobiology expertise to develop and just about complete

a project in which I've set-out to identify novel transcriptional regulators that are critical to the function of a small population of energy homeostasis-controlling neurons. After this project is complete I would like to get back to better understanding why obesity contributes to cognitive decline.

#### *We know that you founded the HMS Black Postdoc Association. What's the story behind how it was created, what work has been recently pursued?*

Well, at the time I had been at BIDMC/HMS for over 4 years, and every day I was confronted with the reality of how isolating it was being a black person within this environment. In many respects, isolation is something that's endemic to the broad postdoctoral experience, as few postdocs regardless of their background acknowledge that their social lives were as rich as they had been during earlier phases of their training, and there are a myriad of reasons for this. But, for individuals that are underrepresented minorities, with respect to their representation in the basic sciences, and in particular black researchers, **the degree of isolation can be stifling—I am the only black person in my department, or building, with a PhD.**

So, I was compelled to create a listserv of black postdoctoral fellows at HMS. It started with just two of my associates and gradually grew to 4 members. I floated the idea of establishing a Black Postdoc Association if there was sufficient interest, and there was. So, on March 6<sup>th</sup>, of 2020, I arranged for us to have our first Zoom meeting. We did, and during that call we discussed our shared experiences of being the "only ones" in our respective environments as well as our anxieties regarding the looming Covid-19 pandemic. We continued to meet weekly, but after the research shut-down later that month, what I named the Harvard Medical School Black Postdoctoral Association (HBPA) really gained steam. Over the past 5 months we've expanded out membership to 26 members, each with primary appointments at the majority of the HMS affiliates—interestingly BCH currently has the most representation in our group. The racially-charged murders of George Floyd, Armand Arbury, Bryanna Taylor and others sparked the push to bring about an end to anti-black racism and the promotion of equity and social justice inspired our group to mobilize to reach out to the HMS administration as a means of urging HMS to join in on the push for social justice while also imploring them to enact various solutions that would serve to enhance the mechanisms of support for black postdocs

across the HMS campus. We are still engaged in productive talks with the HMS administration about ways to address the unique needs of black postdocs.

*In your career, did you ever cope with difficult situations related to your skin color? Did it close doors?*

I've been fortunate to not have had to contend with overt racisms during my career, although, I am sure I may have been adversely impacted by covert racism at some point. My raced-based struggle has been one of psychologically dealing with being an extreme outlier in this environment. Whereas others might be able to interact with, or at least see from a distance, role models that look like them, and thus be inspired while knowing that "if they can do it, so can I", I've not had that privilege. I've only encountered one black female professor in my environment during my 12 years in research, and Corey Harwell (Assistant professor, HMS) who I just met virtually a few months ago was the first ever black male research professor I've had the pleasure of speaking with. With that said, I've been fortunate in that all of my mentors, including my current mentor Evan Rosen, all of whom have been white males, have been incredibly supportive during my training.

**Aside from having to mentally insulate myself from feelings of isolation, I have, on occasion, had to confront colleagues that have spoken in a racially insensitive and at times degrading manner;** one white colleague of mine once joked about someone working like a slave while saying "Yessa Massa" in a weak slave voice. As someone who comes from a legacy of American slavery that was quite unsettling. Aside from those unfortunately incidences, my having to mentally process abhorrent realities of anti-black violence, during the work day, while actively confronting the realities of my own isolation, served to compound my feelings of aloneness. Fortunately, I have my wife to help me unpack these thoughts. But I will say that the concern about those who didn't have strong social support structures outside of lab, those who lived alone and were suffering alone, is what inspired me to establish and develop the HBPA as rapidly as I have, especially during this time of covid-related social distancing.

*What are your views about the underrepresentation of the Black community in academia?*

Black researchers are extremely underrepresented across every phase of the STEM pipeline. As I alluded to earlier, virtually all of the members in the HBPA felt

like they were the only black person in their floors, department, and even buildings. The reasons for this are many, but there are some institutional policies that can be adopted as a means of correcting this. For one, we need the administration across the HMS campus to support our efforts to establish a community. These communities can function as supportive affinity groups that can go a long way towards providing the rich collegial social relationships that many black researchers are currently forced to do without, while providing a safe space for discussions regarding racially charged topics. **We also need PIs and department heads to prioritize recruiting qualified black postdocs and faculty, because inclusion begets more inclusion.**

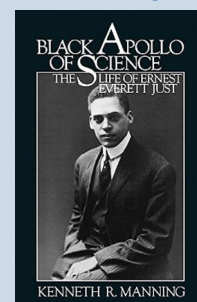
*Do you have a message for the non-Black scientists? And for the future generation of Black scientists?*

Many non-black allies and co-conspirators admirably joined in the calls for promoting pro-black social equity and justice and inclusion. I want them to know that they were all seen, and all appreciated and that their support means a lot. But, it is one thing to have someone cheer you on during a fight and an altogether different thing to have someone join in to help you during a fight. So, of course, the HBPA is certainly interested in taking the charge to promote initiatives that will improve the climate of inclusion at HMS, but we're also enthusiastically receptive to the idea of coalescing with our non-black allies to make HMS a more inclusive environment for black researchers as well as any and all groups that are underrepresented in the academia.

**For the future generations of black scientists, I would implore you to never question your qualifications.** Some might think that you're simply here as a token, but you have to have an unwavering confidence in your competency and capabilities as a researcher and thinker; know your value. Also, seek out a supportive network of other black scientists, and if one does not exist on your campus, or virtually, which I'm confident won't be the case soon, establish one. And finally, remember the mentor you longed for throughout your training, and be that mentor for those coming behind you; pay it forward!

**Recommended reading:**

**Black Apollo of Science, by Kenneth R. Manning**





**Darren E. Higgins, Ph.D.**  
Professor, Department of Microbiology, Blavatnik Institute, Harvard Medical School



*Please tell us more about you and your research interests. What were the main steps of your career?*

Pathogens that replicate within human cells (intracellular pathogens) are responsible for multiple diseases and millions of deaths worldwide. My research interests are focused on understanding the host-pathogen interactions that lead to virulence and the development of acquired immunity to intracellular bacterial pathogens.

I received my B.S. degree in Microbiology from Texas A&M University. I went on to receive a Ph.D. in Microbiology and Immunology from the University of Michigan Medical School and performed my postdoctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and the University of California at Berkeley. I came to Harvard Medical School as an Assistant Professor in 1999 and was promoted to Professor in 2009.

*What inspired you to become a researcher? Who were your mentors/role models during this journey? How did they influence you?*

During high school I became fascinated by biological sciences and mathematics. I devoted equal time to both areas and in addition to becoming president of my high school Science Club, I also participated in statewide University Interscholastic League competitions in mathematics. Prior to high school graduation, my fascinations were more toward biology and I decided a career in medicine would best suit my interests. My long-standing interest in microbiology and infectious diseases was sparked during my undergraduate studies as I became immersed in the areas of genetics, virology, parasitology, immunology, and medical microbiology. During my senior year of undergraduate studies, I decided that a career in academic research would be the most satisfying. However, I remained undecided as to whether research into the mechanisms of microbial pathogenesis or the intricacies of the human immune system held more appeal and thus pursued my Ph.D. in Microbiology and Immunology.

There have been a few notable mentors during my scientific journey. My Ph.D. advisor Dr. Victor DiRita, now chair of microbiology and molecular ge-

netics at Michigan State University, was formative for my development and, in many ways, continues to be. There is also Dr. Dan Portnoy, my postdoctoral advisor at UC Berkeley, who taught me not only how to be a better scientist, but how to be a better person. He taught me that in life, but especially in science, one has to be gracious and generous.

*How has racism, discrimination or the lack of diversity affected your journey?*

The most significant effect of racism on my scientific journey was a delay in my career development because I had to withdraw from my initial graduate program. Following completion of my bachelor's degree at Texas A&M, I had initially joined the Ph.D. program in Microbiology at UC Davis. Davis, California was not a very diverse environment at the time (the late 1980s). I was constantly racially profiled and was not made to feel at all welcome in the community. I was informed by multiple people that Black men in Davis were often assumed to be outside gang members looking to widen distribution of drugs into Northern California. I was frequently stopped by patrol cars, harassed by the police and interrogated as to why I was in the area. I decided to leave UC Davis when it became apparent that there was wide-spread sys-

The decision to leave UC Davis was soundly validated when having dinner with a fellow graduate student (Barbara) to discuss my reasons for leaving Davis. Barbara was a Caucasian woman who was a fellow first-year classmate in the microbiology program. During dinner one night at a local hamburger restaurant, a nearby table of two college-age Caucasian couples were offended at what I presume they thought was an interracial couple. They began saying numerous audible racial slurs. When an older Caucasian man sitting immediately next to the couples spoke up and simply indicated he was offended by their racial comments, a physical altercation was initiated by one of the younger men and the police were ultimately called by the restaurant staff. I was not involved in the altercation, but as witnesses to the incident Barbara and I were interviewed by the police upon their arrival and we recounted the events leading up to the altercation. I had also later reported the incident to a university community relations official and asked them to follow-up on my behalf with the police as I wanted to get in contact if possible with the man who was assaulted by the two college-age men. I was later told by the university official that the older gentleman was arrested, charged with inciting the entire altercation and I was advised by the university official to not make any further inquiries with the police.

temic racism and discrimination in the community that affected multiple aspects of my daily life\*.

I returned to my hometown of San Antonio, Texas and worked as a Histocompatibility Technologist at the University of Texas Health Science Center as I investigated other Ph.D. programs that would be in a more racially diverse and conducive environment. I ultimately chose the University of Michigan Medical School, in part because I had several extended family members in the area who were a great support network.

The lack of diversity in science has been a constant challenge as I have advanced in my career. **Often I have been one of the only, if not the only Black member of my department or training program and now I am only one of a few senior Black faculty members within my institution who holds a tenure-track research position.** The latter situation has resulted in me being constantly asked to participate on multiple committees, panels, classes or task forces to ensure there is a modicum of diversity. While many of these endeavors are laudable, they are not my primary academic responsibility or a criteria for evaluation of performance or promotion in my field. It therefore has required a significant expenditure of effort to remain focused on excelling in my academic pursuits while engaging in the most important extracurricular diversity-related endeavors.

*Have you personally observed racism and discrimination in academia? Did it change over time? Is it better or worse?*

Yes, I have personally experienced racism and discrimination in academia. However, nothing to the level of ultimately impeding my ability to succeed in my academic pursuits. Most of my observations of racism in academia are based on inherent racial profiling and a bias against the perceived ability of Blacks to excel academically.

For example, as a Ph.D. graduate student at the University of Michigan, **it was often assumed that my acceptance into the graduate program was due to a lessening of the admission requirements as opposed to competing on my own merits.** Furthermore, when my postdoc lab moved from the University of Pennsylvania to UC Berkeley, my postdoc advisor asked me to represent the lab and present my current research in a departmental work-in-progress seminar series. He noted that he knew I would give an exceptional presentation. Nonetheless, when I stepped to the podium as the only Black postdoc in

the department, it was overheard that **a Caucasian trainee leaned over to a colleague and said jokingly that he wondered if I was going to "give my presentation in Ebonics."** Again, as a postdoc at UC Berkeley, I observed discrimination specifically against Black men. Whenever a series of thefts occurred in a university building and the suspect was Caucasian, the university police would issue a bulletin describing the suspect in great detail, including height, weight, hair and eye color, facial features and attire. On one particular instance the suspect was a Black man and the police bulletin listed the suspect simply as a "Black man wearing jeans and a T-shirt" with no further details. The police bulletin went on to say that if anyone saw someone in the building who "fit this description" they should not confront the suspect, but call the police immediately. Needless to say, as a Black postdoc who often worked in the building wearing jeans and a T-shirt this was very concerning.

Many years ago, as a faculty member at Harvard, I served on the Admissions Committee for one of the Ph.D. Programs. At the time the Admissions Committee had a minority subcommittee that met separately to decide on admission of minority applicants. Unfortunately, in an effort to increase diversity, the subcommittee would often grant admission to minority applicants who were woefully under-qualified. As a result, the attrition rate of minority Ph.D. students in the program was >50%. When I asked about the metrics that were used to accept a particularly concerning applicant whose academic qualifications were clearly disqualifying, I was told by a member of the all-white minority subcommittee, "Oh, but they're

Since the 1996 controversy over its use by the Oakland School Board, the term **Ebonics** has primarily been used to refer to the sociolect African American English, a dialect distinctively different from Standard American English (SAE). Ebonics pronunciation includes features like the omission of the final consonant in words like 'past' (pas' ) and 'hand' (han'), the pronunciation of the th in 'bath' as t (bat) or f (baf), and the pronunciation of the vowel in words like 'my' and 'ride' as a long ah (mah, rahd).

#### Examples of Ebonics

1. "She bin had dat han'-made dress" (SAE=She's had that hand-made dress for a long time, and still does.)
2. "Ah 'on know what homey be doin." (SAE=I don't know what my friend is usually doing.)
3. "I ask Ruf could she bring it ovah to Tom crib." (SAE=I asked Ruth if/whether she could bring it over to Tom's place.)

Adapted from <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/what-ebonics-african-american-english>

Black.” Inferring that the only available minority candidates for acceptance would necessarily have to be academically inferior. Currently, as the only Black senior faculty member in my department, **I have consistently noticed at faculty meetings that if I make a comment or suggestion it is often dismissed with little discussion.** Nonetheless, if a similar or the same suggestion is later offered by one of my Caucasian counterparts, it is immediately acknowledged with support and no recognition that I had made the same comment only moments ago. Furthermore, quite often if I disagree with one of my colleagues in a firm, but respectful tone, it is assumed that I am being overly aggressive and confrontational. Nonetheless, an even more vehement disagreement by one of my white faculty counterparts is never seen as being overly aggressive or confrontational. It is apparent that even at the faculty level, many of my colleagues are indoctrinated in the old racist trope that Black men are inherently angry, aggressive and confrontational. I will admit that it is possible that these types of encounters may not always stem from a racially motivated origin. However, when a person has experienced multiple incidents of blatant racism and discrimination, they are always left to wonder when they are treated unfairly if it isn't because of an overt act of racism or discrimination.

Collectively, these incidents serve to underscore that as a Black scientist, **I have felt that during my entire academic journey I have had to work twice as hard as my non-Black counterparts to gain half as much recognition.** It is unfortunate, but I feel that although there has been an increase in efforts to improve diversity, racial awareness and inclusion over the past 30 years of my career in academia, nonetheless not too much has changed with respect to the persistence of racism, racial insensitivity and discrimination.

*What are your views about underrepresentation of the Black community in academia or in STEM? What are the major issues that they face in the current academic environment?*

Given the percentage of Blacks in the U.S., the underrepresentation in academia or in STEM is a tragedy. However, given the historical lower socioeconomic status of many Blacks in the U.S. and the systemic barriers to accessing higher education, it is not surprising we still have a long way to go before seeing equity in representation of Blacks in academia or in STEM.

**I believe a major issue facing Blacks in the current academic environment is a dearth of role models to inspire young Black students to pursue a career in academia or STEM.** In addition, mechanisms to help Black students develop strategies to effectively deal with incidents of racism and discrimination are often lacking. Once on a course of academic advancement, effectively maintaining a focus on career development while balancing increasing demands to engage in diversity-related activities is also a challenge facing many Blacks in academia.

*What is your advice to the future and aspiring generations of young Black scientists? How would you advise them to handle bias at workplaces?*

My Top 5 advice list:

**1. Cultivate a collection of mentors.** Having multiple mentors to help advise you in every aspect of your scientific development is critical to success. Too often young scientists feel that their graduate, post-doctoral or other advisor is the de facto mentor for all areas. I find it helpful to identify multiple individuals who excel at a particular aspect of science (whether that be teaching, publishing manuscripts, securing grant funding, managing trainees, etc.) and only solicit them for advice in their particular area of expertise. In this way, you have a broad selection of invested mentors who you can engage as matters arise. The mentors are also not over-burdened and are more likely to remain engaged with you given the sporadic demands on their time.

**2. Always excuse ignorance but never malice.** Given the underrepresentation of Blacks in science, Black scientists will inevitably be engaged by someone who is lacking in knowledge (ignorant) about aspects of Black heritage, culture, etc. As potentially one of a few, if not the only, person of color in your scientific community, individuals may ask you all manner of cultural questions or make statements that seem misplaced. These more often indicate the person is simply uninformed. If the person is genuinely inquisitive and not intending to be spiteful, then some restraint is warranted as it is an opportunity to educate individuals (i.e. a teachable moment) who may otherwise simply not know. On the other hand, blatant acts of racism and discrimination (malice) should never be excused.

**3. Do not become dissuaded in your goals because of setbacks.** Setbacks are inevitable in science and especially academia. It is not that setbacks occur, but how you overcome them that defines you. I find

it helpful to adopt a low threshold of gratification in science. Not everything works perfectly the first time, or the 40<sup>th</sup>. The fact that you are able to learn from your prior experiences and apply that to a new approach is part of the journey to success.

**4. Do not work in a bubble.** In the current era of social media and technological advancements, it is easy to become siloed within a small group. It is imperative to always ask questions and engage in-person with others outside of your immediate sphere of influence. This extraverted behavior will be beneficial for success throughout your career development.

**5. In life, but especially in science, be gracious and generous.** The world of science is comparatively small and interconnected. Individuals will often cross paths on multiple occasions over time. The impression that someone has of you is only as good as your last interaction. If that person is in a position to positively affect your career in some manner in the future, they are more likely to do so in return for your prior consideration. As the saying goes, "What goes around comes around."

Workplace bias must be addressed expeditiously. If the bias is from a contemporary, the issue should be addressed directly with the individual(s) and the perceived bias clearly indicated. Furthermore, one needs to pose questions as to how the course of action that was perceived as being biased against you was decided upon by the individual(s). This will hopefully lead to a discussion on the matter and a mechanism of resolution. If the bias is systemic and from a superior, it may be beneficial to discuss the matter with others who are also experiencing the same bias against them and collectively engage the superior in a manner that initially just informs the superior of the concern. Subsequently, a meeting to discuss the matter should be conducted. Depending on the situation, a third-party mediator may be needed to assist in finding a resolution to the matter.

*How can non-Black scientists promote better allyship and be better allies?*

1. Do not be quick to dismiss Black scientists when they discuss incidents of racism and discrimination they are enduring.
2. Be willing to engage in frank and uncomfortable conversations about matters of racism and discrimination and how they may be addressed.
3. Confront non-Black peers when they engage in racially-insensitive behaviors or remarks.
4. Be proactive and directly inquire about any racial

issues that your Black-scientist peers may be having difficulty in managing.

5. Provide reassurance that you are available to be an ally.

*What steps can be taken by postdocs and scientists as a community to be more aware and actively inclusive?*

I think that Black postdocs and scientists can take a more active role in educating their scientific communities at large on how racism, discrimination and a lack of diversity affects them personally. Because of the current climate of racial unrest, the increased awareness of systemic racism and movements such as Black Lives Matter, there is an avenue to engage in a series of meaningful open forum conversations with non-Black scientists. **Because of the subject matter, these conversations are by nature uncomfortable.** Nonetheless, when individuals in the majority who are not subject to racism and discrimination hear directly about the experiences of minority individuals who they know and with whom they work, the experiences discussed become more relatable. Once someone has a personal investment or perspective on an issue then there can be a more unified path to mechanisms of improvement.

*Would you share with us a movie, book, podcast, etc. that would help us to better understand the current/past situation?*

I would recommend the movie "Something the Lord Made". It is currently available on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

Something the Lord Made is a 2004 American made-for-television biographical drama film about the black cardiac pioneer Vivien Thomas (1910–1985) and his complex and volatile partnership with white surgeon Alfred Blalock (1899–1964), the "Blue Baby doctor" who pioneered modern heart surgery. Although Vivien Thomas (Mos Def), a black man in the 1930s, is originally hired as a janitor, he proves himself adept at assisting the "Blue Baby doctor," Alfred Blalock (Alan Rickman), with his medical research. When Blalock insists that Thomas follow him to Johns Hopkins University, they must find a way to skirt a racist system to continue their study of infant heart disease. Thomas is indispensable to Blalock's progress, but Blalock is the only one who is allowed to receive the acclaim.



## Clifford Woolf, Ph.D.

Chair of Neurobiology and F. M. Kirby Neurobiology Center;  
**Amy Weinberg, Program Director**  
<https://kirbyneuro.org/>

Clifford Woolf and Amy Weinberg are leading a number of new departmental initiatives within the Center including establishing a Diversity Committee for community engagement.



### *Have you seen racism and discrimination in academia change over time? Are there aspects where it has become better? Or worse?*

I have noticed greater numbers of people of color and women present in science, as well as increased support at the federal level for the training and development of these populations. People of color and women are starting to ascend to leadership positions.

### *What are some prominent issues you see postdocs facing in today's academic environment?*

While I believe the numbers of people of color and women in science have increased, many employers have not done enough to recruit people of color or women to their ranks. Postdocs want to get jobs at companies that stand against racism and provide a good working environment. Women taking time off to have children and the transition back to work are challenging under the best circumstances; however, lack of resources for pumping, the cost of childcare, low postdoc salaries, and the expectation from colleagues to continue projects at work all add to the already pressure-loaded environment.

### *As a department, how are you working to address issues of discrimination and racism in academia?*

The FM Kirby Neurobiology Center strongly believes that racism has no place among our ranks. Although we have always felt that way, it is clear that these beliefs aren't enough. We have to speak out and take proactive steps to create the environment we seek, so people will know that we are for them. We wanted to do something, but weren't sure where to begin. A survey sent to all of our members helped us understand the concerns and experiences of our staff. Using these results, **we developed a list of potential actions we could take to begin to combat racism, improve the environment, especially for those facing**

### **discrimination, and take concrete steps to recruit, train and retain people of color to the Kirby Center.**

Currently a group of faculty is in the process of forming a Diversity Committee to assess, refine, and prioritize our action items.

### *What were your motivations and goals for launching the survey? Have you found any interesting results yet?*

Our goals were to understand the experiences of our students, fellows, research assistants, administrative staff, core personnel, fellows and faculty, to inform actions we could take to improve. I was sad to see that those who have experienced discrimination were not satisfied that actions were taken to right their situations. Another result that stuck out was the amount of sexism people have experienced.

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### **BCH Postdoc Association's pledge against racism**

The PDA board has committed to elevate the voices of Black researchers and continue to promote diversity and inclusion in our events with the following goals:

- Host Black postdocs panel discussion with NPA and/or HMS Black Postdoc Association
- Improve representation of speakers at mentorship and career development events
- Highlight works of Black scientists and other scientists of color
- Advocate for hiring and/or support of more Black postdocs. Past survey data displays hiring disparities
- Publicize avenues postdocs have for reporting discrimination, and identification of support for postdocs who experience racism and discrimination in their labs
- Increase representation in public affairs/communications
- Promote materials for non-Black postdocs to read that address issues Black postdocs and other postdocs of color face in the sciences/academia
- Work with BCH office of Health Equity and Inclusion on mentoring outreach programs to engage students from underrepresented communities to science.

### **Resources**

For more information, HMS has curated a list of resources: <https://dicp.hms.harvard.edu/resources-anti-racism>.



## Postdoc Spotlight!

Learn a little about our new PDA Co-Presidents, **Kimberly Wong (KW)** and **Sreya Ghosh (SG)**!

*Can you give us a little background on yourself, your lab, your work?*



**KW:** I am a neurobiologist that has studied eyes for my whole scientific career. I completed my PhD at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, NY, which focused on biochemical signaling pathways controlling neural induction and eye development.

At BCH, I am working in the Benowitz Lab to understand the signaling mechanisms (including kinase signaling, metallic ions, and glial signaling cascades) that occur after optic nerve injury and lead to visual impairment.



**SG:** I am an immunologist, who doesn't work with T cells! More specifically, I am an innate immunologist studying immune responses in viral infections and cancer. Originally from Calcutta, India, I completed my Ph.D. from UMass Medical School (Kate Fitzgerald's lab) in Worcester, MA and am currently in Ivan Zanoni's lab (Immunology) working with Type III Interferons.

*What is your main goal as president of the BCH PDA, where do you really want to make an impact for postdocs?*

**KW:** I originally joined the PDA as an opportunity to meet fellow postdocs as well as advocate for the rights of the postdocs. My goal as co-president is to make sure that the postdoctoral community at BCH remains diverse, welcoming, and beneficial to all of our postdocs, and that we are acknowledged as important members of the greater BCH community.

**SG:** For every one of us at the BCH-PDA, in whatever role we are serving, our main aim has always been to build a community of friendship and support. As a member, and now Co-President, of BCH PDA, advocacy for postdocs has always been important to me. It is imperative that we feel appreciated as scientists.

*What are you already super happy with that has changed for postdocs thanks to the PDA?*

**KW:** Our former board members and executive board have established an amazing platform from

which our ideas can be heard. Because of their hard work, our organization is able to work directly with the BCH research administration. This has given us unique opportunities to advocate for postdocs on issues such as benefits, research support, and career opportunities.

**SG:** Our predecessors, Alessandro, Colette, Sarah, Ari & Hani have done an amazing job of setting the stage for us. They successfully implemented new ideas and fostered solidarity within the community.

*Which is your favorite BCH PDA event?*

**KW:** I always enjoyed the social and networking events because it got postdocs out of the lab, especially the pub nights, game nights, and the annual Holiday Party. These events allowed us to take a break from the lab and our coworkers and meet other people! It was these events that first made me aware of the PDA when I first moved here three years ago!

**SG:** The COVID times made me realize that the Holiday party and other networking/gathering events are my favorite. The academic and industry panel discussions are also events that I have benefitted from a lot (and since I was also the co-chair of the Career Development committee previously, I cannot not mention their events!).

*What is your favorite thing to do in Boston?*

**KW:** I love running and biking around the city, especially along the Charles River! I started biking as a way to cut my commute times in half (20 min biking vs 40 min bus), but now that the pandemic has me working from home half of the time, my favorite thing to do is bike to the river and set up a river-facing mini-office and read papers or write emails with a nice view.

**SG:** Eating out! It may not be other like the other big cities in the USA but I love the food scene in Boston. I also enjoy going on walks in different parts of the city.

*Favorite Boston Bar/Restaurant?*

**KW:** My favorite worknight take-out spots are Five Spices House, Pai Kin Kao, and The Mad Monkfish in Central Square, but my all-time favorite Boston restaurant is Buttermilk & Bourbon.

**SG:** That's a tough one. If I really have to pick favorites, I had the most memorable food experiences at Duozo Sushi, Gyu-Kaku BBQ, Barcelona Wine Bar, & Mast' (the last is for my Italian lab mates!).

# BCH Postdoc Achievements!

If you would like to share a recently published a paper or award recieved, contact us at [postdoc-publicaffairs@chil-drens.harvard.edu](mailto:postdoc-publicaffairs@chil-drens.harvard.edu) (provide your full name, lab, title and journal for publications and information on sponsor for awards). Congrats to the authors and awardees!

## Publications from BCH Postdocs

**Achille Broggi & Sreya Ghosh**, Zanoni lab (Immunology) published "Type III interferons disrupt the lung epithelial barrier upon viral recognition" in Science. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Kleitton Silva Borges**, Breault Lab (Endocrinology) published: "Wnt/ $\beta$ -catenin activation cooperates with loss of p53 to cause adrenocortical carcinoma in mice" in Oncogene. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Alessia Di Nardo**, Sahin lab (Neurobiology) published: "Phenotypic Screen with TSC-Deficient Neurons Reveals Heat-Shock Machinery as a Druggable Pathway for mTORC1 and Reduced Cilia" in Cell Reports. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Joanne B. Cole**, Hirschhorn lab (Endocrinology) published: "Comprehensive genomic analysis of dietary habits in UK Biobank identifies hundreds of genetic associations" in Nature Communications. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Huixin Xu**, Lehtinen lab (Neurobiology) published a commentary: "Cerebrospinal Fluid Magnetic Resonance Imaging: Improving Early Diagnosis of Autism and Other Neurodevelopmental Conditions" in Biological Psychiatry: Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuroimaging. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Sarah Ducamp**, Fleming lab (Pathology) published: "Mutations in the iron-sulfur cluster biogenesis protein HSCB cause congenital sideroblastic anemia" in the Journal in Clinical Investigation. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Yongfei Cai**, Bing Chen lab (Molecular Medicine) published: "Distinct conformational states of SARS-CoV-2 spike protein" in Science. 2020. [\[Link\]](#) and was also highlighted by Boston Children's Hospital Discoveries [\[Link\]](#)

**Hakan Coskun**, Burns Lab (Cardiology) published a review: "The rationale of using mesenchymal stem cells in patients with COVID-19-related acute respiratory distress syndrome: What to expect" in Stem Cells Translational Medicine. 2020.

**Kai Wang**, Melero-Martin Lab (Cardiac Surgery) published "Robust differentiation of human pluripotent stem cells into endothelial cells via temporal modulation of ETV2 with modified mRNA" in Science Advances. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Rima El Atrache**, Loddenkemper lab (Neurology) published "Photoplethysmography: A measure for

the function of the autonomic nervous system in focal impaired awareness seizures" in Epilepsia. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Allison J. Wu**, Oken lab (Division of Chronic Disease Research Across the Lifecourse – CoRAL) published: "Associations of DXA -measured abdominal adiposity with cardio-metabolic risk and related markers in early adolescence in Project Viva" in Pediatric Obesity. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

**Daniel Overbeek & Alexandra Kass** (Medical Toxicology Fellow) published: "Case series: Adolescent victims of the vaping public health crisis with pulmonary complications" in Pediatric Pulmonology. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

And a review "A review of toxic effects of electronic cigarettes/vaping in adolescents and young adults" in Clinical Reviews in Toxicology. 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

## Awards to BCH Postdocs

**Boxun Zhao**, Lee & Yu labs (Division of Genetics and Genomics) was awarded the 2-year "Manton Center Rare Disease Research Fellowship". [\[Link\]](#)

**Nan Liu**, Orkin lab (Hematology/Oncology) was awarded the K99/R00 – Pathway to Independence Award from NIDDK for his work on "Roles of BCL11A in  $\gamma$ -globin repression". [\[Link\]](#)

**Areum Han**, Daley lab (Stem Cell Program) was awarded the National Blood Foundation Early-Career Research Grant for the project "The role of the RNA editor-exonuclease axis in RNA turnover during erythropoiesis: from mouse embryo studies to in vitro modeling".

**Arthur S Lee**, Engle lab (Neurobiology) was awarded a 2020 fellowship from the Manton Center for Orphan Disease Research (\$200,000 total costs over 2 years) for the work "Leveraging epigenomics for non-coding variant interpretation in orphan disease". [\[Link\]](#)

**Aram Ghalali**, Zetter & Rogers lab (Vascular Biology Program) was awarded the 2020 AACR Scholar-In-Training Award for his research on "The role of the oncogene AZIN1 on the aggressiveness of prostate cancer".

**Sara Canovas Nunes**, Williams lab (Hematology/Oncology) was awarded an Alex's Lemonade Stand young investigator grant for her research on "Targeting the Rac GTPase pathway to sabotage RAS signaling in RAS-mutated leukemia". [\[Link\]](#)

## MASK CONTEST



## WINNERS

1<sup>st</sup> Place (9 votes)



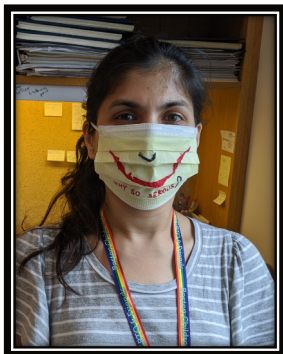
Aram Ghalali

2<sup>nd</sup> Place (7 votes)



Queeny Dasgupta

3<sup>rd</sup> Place (5 votes)



Pooja Sanduja

3<sup>rd</sup> Place (5 votes)



Daniëlle Peterse

## OUR TEAM



**EXECUTIVE BOARD:** Kimberly Wong and Sreya Ghosh (co-presidents), Julie Sesen (treasurer), Caroline Schuster-Kubaczka (secretary)

**EDITORS-IN-CHIEF:** Julie Sesen, Sarah Ducamp

**CONTENT CONTRIBUTORS:** Sarah Ducamp, Nicholas Hanovice, Julie Sesen, Ari Tabaac, and Kimberly Wong

**LAYOUT EDITOR:** Kimberly Wong

## Upcoming Events

Look out for our emails and subscribe to our calendar to find out about events hosted by the BCH Postdoctoral Association, the OFT and the greater Boston research community: [tinyurl.com/BCHPDACalendar](http://tinyurl.com/BCHPDACalendar)

Every Wednesdays @ 1 pm: Career Journal Club with Dr. Jim Gould and Dr. Lu-Ann Pozzi

Sept 21- Sept 25: Postdoc Appreciation Week! Look out for events hosted by National Postdoc Association: [www.nationalpostdoc.org/events/](http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/events/)

Sept 24: BCH Alumni: Paths to Industry - Part II: See where our former PDA co-presidents are working now and how they got there! [transition2industry.eventbrite.com](http://transition2industry.eventbrite.com)

Oct.: Crafting your Elevator Pitch: Prepare your pitch for our All-Star Mentoring event! Registration TBA

Nov. 5th: All-Star Mentoring event: Stay tuned for our upgraded annual event - this time virtual!

Nov. 9th: 2nd Annual Jeremy Ullmann Lecture: The Epilepsy Genetics Program and Department of Neurology is hosting Dr. Lori Isom (U. Michigan).

### RATE YOUR MENTOR!

Every year the PDA recognizes the amazing mentors we have at BCH with **two Best Mentor awards**: one to established investigators, and the "J.F.P. Ullmann Award" to rising investigators. To make these awards possible, the PDA Mentoring Committee is interested in hearing about your mentors (the great, the good, and also the not-so-good). If you want to nominate your advisor, please complete our Rate Your Mentor survey: [www.surveymonkey.com/r/rateMentor2020](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/rateMentor2020)

The PI with the best mentor rating will be awarded at our **All-Star Mentoring Event on Nov 5th, 2020**.

**Interested in a virtual scientific event or an online career development course but there's a fee?**  
The PDA will fund up to \$100 towards your registration fees!

Please submit an application by emailing [postdoc@childrens.harvard.edu](mailto:postdoc@childrens.harvard.edu) with the following information:

- Full name and Lab
- Title of the course
- Date of the event (must be scheduled Sept-Jan)
- 4-5 lines about what motivates you to attend this course

**Follow us to find out more about our great events and postdoc community!**

Have questions, comments or want to join the Association? Email us at [postdoc@childrens.harvard.edu](mailto:postdoc@childrens.harvard.edu).

Leaving soon? If you or a labmate recently moved on from your postdoc, please invite them to join our Alumni network! Send us your personal email address at [postdoc@childrens.harvard.edu](mailto:postdoc@childrens.harvard.edu) to register as BCH Alumni and share your career