



BGSA NEWSLETTER

JULY 2021



UPCOMING EVENTS

- Summer Career Seminar Series.....July & August
- Welcome Back Picnic.....August 25
- Pittsburgh Scavenger Hunt.....September

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Pitt BGSA



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

MICHELLE LYNSKEY

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Dear School of Medicine,

Congratulations on finishing up another year! In this edition of the newsletter, Anu recaps the successes of the D&I committee over this past year and introduces us to the two new co-chairs. We also feature two incredible women as our spotlights. Our student spotlight is the outgoing BGSA President, Nicole Kaminski. Nicole has worked extremely hard this past year towards a more equitable and diverse graduate student environment. We also have the pleasure of featuring Jessica Toothaker, PhD a recent PMI graduate. Jessica writes of how she landed her current job and gives some tips on how to establish contacts in a field where you don't know anyone. Finally, we have an Op-Ed written by Gabby Gerlach where she dives into the notion of women taking on a disproportionate work load as volunteers when women make up a minority of the graduate student population.

As the outgoing newsletter editor, I would like to personally thank you for helping me make the BGSA newsletter what it currently is. I am excited to see where my successor, Anu Balogun, takes the newsletter during her upcoming term.

Take care of yourselves,
Michelle Lynskey

TRAVEL AWARDS

CONGRATULATIONS TO DEVANSHI NAYAK (PMI), KIEN TRAN (MGDB), AND ALLISON WELP (PMI), WINNERS OF THE BGSA TRAVEL AWARDS FOR MAY AND JUNE.

PAST WINNERS

MARCH: BECCA KRITSCHIL (CMP)

APRIL: RUBY HOLLAND (MSTP/CNUP) & RITHIKA BEHERA (CMP)



DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION COMMITTEE

ANU BALOGUN

The diversity and inclusion (D&I) committee are immensely proud to announce our new and recently elected co-chairs Tiffany Taylor and Sam Herron. Although it is a bitter-sweet moment for the committee, we are excited at the numerous possibilities present for our successors. Tiffany Taylor is currently a rising fourth year in the Immunology Program. She has a long-standing interest in proffering solutions for diversity issues. She is also currently a member of the committee for the office of the Learning Environment, among other roles and activities within the SOM. Sam Herron is a rising fifth year in the Pathology program. Sam has played a key role in addressing diversity and inclusion issues on the dean's Rapid Response Team and was integral in the development of the D&I committee as the 2019-2020 BGSA President.

Sidney Lane and I are happy to report several accomplishments undertaken during our tenure including establishing and maintaining the D&I committee and completing numerous BGSA lecture series through our Education & Allyship subcommittee. Additionally, we formed a fruitful collaboration with the Office of the Learning Environment to establish a comprehensive ethics course directed at graduate students within the SOM. Lastly, the D&I was present at all interviews and orientations in the SOM during this past admissions cycle. Our most sincere gratitude goes to the outgoing BGSA executive board for their constant support as well as our committee members for all their contributions towards the success of the BGSA's first-ever D&I committee.

JULY 2021 RAFFLE

IN THIS ISSUE OF THE NEWSLETTER, THE BGSA IS RAFFLING OFF A \$15 GIFT CARD TO A LOCAL PITTSBURGH BUSINESS OF YOUR CHOICE!

RAFFLE: [HTTPS://FORMS.GLE/GSHN5GNBMDUGKCDA](https://forms.gle/GSHN5GNBMDUGKCDA)



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

NICOLE KAMINSKI

I am a rising fifth year Molecular Pharmacology graduate student in the O'Sullivan Lab at the Hillman Cancer Center. In addition to my role as a SOM graduate student, I am also the outgoing BGSA president of 2020-2021 - as many of the graduate students may already know from the multitude of emails I've spammed them with over the last year. I am honored to be the student spotlight for this edition of the BGSA newsletter. I've decided to use this platform to talk about my experience as a graduate student at Pitt both inside and outside of the lab.

My thesis work has been focused on defining the underlying molecular mechanisms within the Alternative Lengthening of Telomeres (ALT) pathway. If you ever took an undergraduate cancer biology class, you probably learned that cancer cells reactivate the reverse transcriptase, telomerase, to lengthen their telomeres in order to ultimately achieve the cancer hallmark of replicative immortality. Much to my surprise, when I started rotating in the O'Sullivan lab, I learned that approximately 15% of cancers utilize ALT, a homology directed repair driven mechanism, to lengthen their telomeres. Cancer cells that undergo ALT (ALT+ cancer cells) experience increased telomeric instability that often results in telomeric double strand breaks (DSBs). Since all telomeres consist of recurring TTAGGG repeats, there is always a homologous template in the event of a DSB. Therefore, the stochastic DSBs formed at the telomeres of ALT+ cancer cells feed into the homology directed repair driven ALT pathway. Currently, I am focused on elucidating how the transcription of ALT telomeres interplays with ALT

homology directed repair and how ALT telomere transcription is regulated. If I lost you in the description of my research, don't worry it took me a long time to grasp it. As graduate students, we tend to feel pressure to know everything there is to know about our science. For me, coming from a completely different background into this niche field of science was a huge source of imposter syndrome. Through the BGSA I ended up meeting many other graduate students from different programs and learned that imposter syndrome was, in fact, the norm and not something that only I was experiencing. After four years of hard work, I am ecstatic to share that I recently was offered a F31 fellowship award to continue this research.

One of the new BGSA initiatives this past year was to promote more conversations among graduate students focused on topics outside of science. We have lives outside of being graduate students after all, whether it be extracurriculars or simply enjoying the beautiful city we live in, and that deserves to be celebrated as well. So, in line with this sentiment, I didn't want to only speak about the research I've been focused on as a graduate student because I feel as though there's more to my graduate experience than just that.

The BGSA has been an enormous part of my graduate student life here at Pitt. I joined the BSGA at the start of my first year of graduate school and served as an IBGP first year program representative. I enjoyed the sense of community, so I went on to serve as Pharmacology program representative in my second year. In all honesty, as I was entering my third year, I was perfectly happy with my low time

commitment program representative position. However, I was reluctantly convinced to fill the executive board position of VP of Communications. In this position, I recreated the BGSA website, revamped the BGSA newsletter, and created a social media presence for the BGSA.

Additionally, as an exec board member, I was exposed to more of the issues graduate students were grappling with. It was in this position that I began to realize the differences that the BGSA could make in the UPSOM graduate community. During my BGSA presidency, we elected our very first Diversity and Inclusion co-chairs and committee members, expanded the BGSA Buddy Program to more than twice its size, advocated for

and received new mental health resources for graduate students, began addressing graduate student issues in monthly SOM townhalls, and most of all survived a pandemic. As a first-year graduate student, I never in my wildest dreams would have imagined that I would be a part of all of these changes. My time in the BGSA has taught me not to be afraid to dream big, that anyone can make a change, and you're not as small as you think you are. I couldn't have done any of this alone. If you ever feel a call to action regarding something that you are truly passionate about, speaking from experience, if you put forth the effort you might be surprised how many people stand behind you.



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

JESSICA TOOTHAKER, PhD

It feels strange to write something for the alumni spotlight on the same day I got an email saying my diploma was mailed to my parents' house. While I'm luckily not currently living in my parents' basement, this was a worry back in January when I didn't have a job lined up and had filed to graduate in four months.

I imagine those of you that know me might be surprised to see that I'm contributing to the BGSA newsletter. Michelle can fact check me, but I'm pretty sure this would be my only active participation in a SOM extracurricular activity. I was never in the BGSA, I'm not a 4RS alumna and I believe I would have been least likely to be asked to represent PMI at events.

I don't say this to insinuate that I had no life outside of lab, or that I believe participating in student groups is a waste of time. When I started in PMI in the fall of 2017, I simply had no desire to join school sponsored clubs or participate in professional development activities. I knew from the beginning I wanted to finish my PhD early and leave academia so instead of going to clubs afterwork, I stayed in the lab and met up with my friends after their meetings. This lifestyle worked for me. I was as happy as any PhD candidate can be.

However, when I began my job search in early 2021, I started to feel like academic-sponsored career webinars wanted me to feel ashamed of my approach to graduate school. Sure, the panels had

members from inside and outside of academia alike, but whenever a question was asked about how you actually find a job many of the panelists would say a paraphrased version of: "I had a previous connection from so and so extracurricular activity."

This was immensely discouraging.

Why was I feeling punished for working hard and getting my degree? Just because I didn't join clubs does not mean I did nothing outside my degree requirements. I had published three first author papers and an editorial in Science. I gave oral presentations at national meetings and frequently spoke at internal seminars. How could I not be doing enough? Had I blown all chances of getting a job aside from an academic post-doc?

I made a decision to no longer go to group-style career events. Instead, I asked my PI to give me the contact information for every person she knew that had left academia. I emailed them all and set up a bunch of informational interviews. To my surprise, none of these people thought I wasn't doing enough. I was able to have productive conversations one-on-one with professionals across all disciplines. I now had a network but I still didn't have any of these connections handing me a job offer.

So, I did what most of the world does and applied to job postings on LinkedIn, Glassdoor, and Indeed.com. I set my desired living locations and put in key words like "Immunology" and "Medical Communications". I applied to every new job that came up on my daily job alert. I interviewed for medical writing openings, medical science liaison (MSLs) jobs, scientist positions in big pharma and small startups, and even a science consulting positions for a national tax firm.

I was able to land my current dream job straight out of my PhD as a Scientific Associate for ProEd Communications in the Health Care Consultancy Group because I had interviewed for a variety of different positions and was no longer surprised by my interviewers' questions. I had no prior connections to this company but still feel like a part of the team after only working here a few weeks. I spend my days taking clinical trial data from pharmaceutical companies and making it understandable to a variety of audiences such as health care providers and MSLs.

I only work 9-5.

I have never been happier both professionally and personally in my adult life.

If you take nothing else away from this article, or if you didn't read it and just want a synopsis here's some important tips:

- No experience from your PhD is invaluable.
- Network in ways that make you feel positive about yourself and excited for the future.
- Apply to online recruitment posts.
- Never turn down an interview.
- You are more qualified than you think.

Jessica Toothaker wrote this piece in her personal capacity and it does not reflect the views of ProEd Communications or the HealthCare Consultancy Group.



DISPROPORTIONATELY FEMALE

GABBY GERLACH

Unlike other STEM fields, since 1990, the number of women in computer occupations has been falling. In 2019, less than 20% of computer workers were female (1). My first experience with computational research was during undergrad at Skidmore College. Skidmore used to be a women's college, and women still make up about 60% of each class. This meant that my upper-level chemistry courses were predominately female and my lab had only female students for a couple years. I was unaware of the novelty and benefits of such an environment then, but I am now.

At Pitt, I am a second-year graduate student in the CMU-Pitt Computational Biology Program (CPCB), and my program, like essentially all computational PhD programs, is dominated by male students. This downward trend of women in computational occupations and the horrendous lack of racial diversity needs to be addressed, but I want to talk about the women who are here.

During research seminars, I (virtually) look around and see relatively few women, but every working group, committee, or assembly I attend looks more like my undergraduate lab than my PhD program. For example, the CPCB Graduate Student Assembly president has been a female student for the past 5 years, and currently, the rest of the members are 2/3 female. I co-chair a committee, which along with 4 faculty members, has 6 students, only one of whom is male. A group of School of Medicine graduate students have spent the past several months preparing materials to update our incredibly outdated graduate ethics course. This group again

has 6 students, including me, and only one male. I am also a graduate student advisor to the Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) that takes place in my department, and most other students who volunteer are female. Take a peek at the newsletter committee for BGSA, it follows the trend. The extra, unpaid, and generally under-appreciated work appears to be disproportionately falling to female students who are already the minority.

I believe that all the non-research I do has value. Student government allows me to advocate for change within my program, and it is also fun to plan events that we get to attend. I was a student in the REU in my department, and the graduate students who I interacted with are a big reason I decided to pursue a PhD. Our current ethics course does not talk about the importance of creating and maintaining a diverse, equitable, and inclusive research environment, nor does it have any mention of computational research. Not teaching this content is a disservice to the trainees at Pitt who lack the ability to discuss and address the glaring lack of diversity in Biomedical Research. That research is becoming more interdisciplinary, and computational research comes with a separate set of ethical concerns we would benefit from understanding.

My goal in writing this is not to simply encourage male students to volunteer, though please do if you feel inclined. The goal is to point out how this disparity contradicts with the disparity of the field and aligns with the knowledge that women contribute an outsized proportion of the world's

unpaid labor (2). Since neither my program nor the SOM appears to value the work they keep asking volunteers to do I am going to take a new approach. From now on, I am only going to do what I find personally rewarding, and I encourage you to do the same.

1. Anthony Martinez and Cheridan Christnacht. "Women are Nearly half of U.S. Workforce but only 27% of STEM Workers." *United States Census Bureau*. 2021.
2. Asi, Yara, and Cynthia Williams. "A woman's (unpaid) work: Global perspectives on gender, healthcare, and caregiving." *Three Facets of Public Health and Paths to Improvements*. Academic Press, 2020. 261-294.

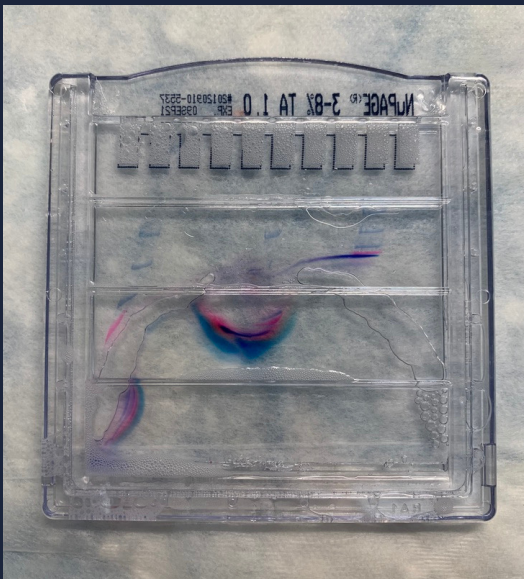


HAPPY ACCIDENTS

MISHAL RAO

*"We don't make mistakes, just happy accidents."
- Bob Ross*

Mistakes in research are part of the journey! If we don't make any, are we actually trying? In the moment, our mistakes and mishaps seem quite major but in the larger part of our graduate journey they are miniscule. In hindsight, they seem amusing and end up being a learning experience. In an effort to normalize mishaps, we will highlight some "Happy Accidents" that will feature funny stories or photos depicting lab mishaps!



"It was probably shipped that way but I maintain that the voltage was too strong."

-Sam Herron



A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

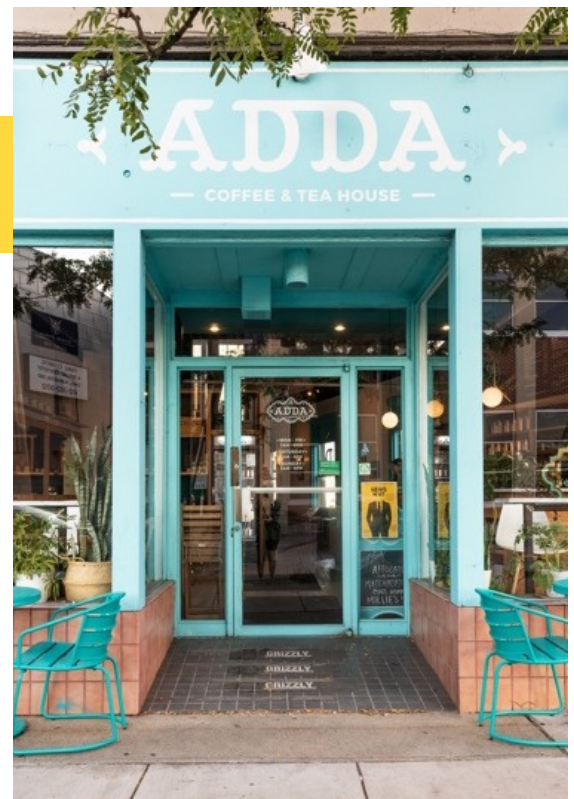
BECCA KRITSCHIL

Welcome! Glad to have you here. Are you looking for some new hobbies to do in Pittsburgh? Have a date but not sure where to take them? Or just looking for a good hangout spot with your friends this weekend? You're in the right place! This is a new column to the newsletter that focuses on this great city we are in and why we love it- or at least some things we love about it- if you aren't quite sold on this Yinzer nation! Maybe checking out a few of these spots will help change your mind. At the very least you'll have a fun time! Let's get exploring:

ADDA COFFEE & TEA

Becca Kritschil: If you have ever been to Mad Mex or Urban Tap on Highland Avenue, I am sure you've seen the bright blue lettering of ADDA right down the street. When I moved to the East side of Pittsburgh this was the first coffee shop my roommates and I discovered. Apparently, there is also a shop in the North Side! Unfortunately, I have only ever been there to pick up coffee and never gone inside because during the pandemic no one was allowed inside. Still, it was always busy and the tables outside and in the street were always full of people! My roommate is absolutely obsessed with their cinnamon almond milk latte. She finishes it in the car before she even gets home! Like Big Dog, this is a coffee and tea shop, and I have tried their

tea once. Unlike Big Dog, I was less familiar with the type of tea they had which made it difficult for me to choose on the app. In addition to only being able to pick up orders, you had to order everything online, and there weren't descriptions like there would be on a sign in the store. Now that the local restrictions have lifted I am excited to actually go inside this coffee shop and check it out! If you have already been inside, what do you go there to do?? Meet friends, work, or just sit and enjoy a cup of coffee?



SHADYSIDE/EAST LIBERTY

4121 MAIN

Sanjana Thosar says: 4121 Main is a cute local coffee shop in Bloomfield and successfully satisfied my many caffeine and chocolate cravings over the last few months. They have a very unique selection of flavor combinations, ranging from soothing lavender to spicy peppercorn lattes. My recent favorite is their Cuban cortado; I highly recommend it. In addition to delicious coffee and baked goods, 4121 Main also has a great collection of plants, fun ceramics, and other small goodies. I recently learned that they also do events (including weddings)! If you're looking for some pre-work coffee, a new plant, or need some design inspiration for an event you're planning, definitely check out 4121 Main in Bloomfield!



BIG DOG CAFÉ

Becca Kritschil says: Big Dog Coffee shop is the first locally-owned coffee shop I visited in Pittsburgh. Even though I lived two blocks away, I didn't discover it until two years after moving to Pittsburgh. After that, I brought everyone I knew to it and met with friends there frequently! Big Dog is not a big coffee shop, but it is always buzzing with energy! There are several distinct areas, the front, back, and patio, with different ambiances. In the winter, I loved to sit in the front room by the fire, and, in the fall, the patio was a great place to enjoy the cool evenings. Big Dog serves both coffee and tea, which are equally delicious! My favorite tea was the jasmine peach, and my favorite coffee drink was a vanilla latte. I have many great memories from this cute coffee shop; I am sad to live so far away from it now. Thankfully they have loose leaf tea you can purchase, so I still enjoy my favorite tea from home!



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