2012 PGA Retreat – Celebrating Our Achievements!

In celebration of Postdoc Appreciation Week, and to bring together the DFCI postdoctoral and graduate student communities, the 8th annual PGA Retreat was held on September 21 at the Holiday Inn Beacon Hill. This year’s retreat was a major success thanks to the tireless efforts of the PGSAO and the PGA Retreat Committee.

The Bok Players, an interactive theatre group developed at Harvard University, presented a skit about mentorship in the sciences. During the play, we shared the frustration of a hypothetical junior faculty member seeking a mentor, and we experienced many of the difficulties and hurdles she faced during the career transition process. This led to a thought-provoking discussion between the Players and the audience.

Our keynote speaker was Dr. Harold Varmus, Nobel Laureate and Director of the National Cancer Institute. Dr. Varmus addressed the difficult funding environment we are facing, including the sequestration and budget cuts that could greatly impact government grants. We next learned from many of our DFCI colleagues about their ongoing research at a poster session; this was followed by oral presentations from four DFCI graduate students and postdocs.

The day ended with a cocktail/networking reception during which the two best oral and two best poster presenters were given $1,000 awards – see pg. 2 for more details. Also, Dr. William Hahn received the first Mentor of the Year Award for his positive impact on advancing the careers of his lab members; he will use the $500 award for mentoring activities.

The annual PGA retreat is free and open to all DFCI postdoctoral fellows and graduate students. It is a great opportunity to interact and network with your colleagues and to hear from top scientists. If you did not attend this year, don’t miss the next annual PGA retreat in September 2013!
Robin Lee – Award for Best Oral Presentation

3rd year postdoc in the laboratory of Dr. Susanne Gaudet, Department of Cancer Biology
PhD in Cellular and Molecular Medicine from the University of Ottawa

What key strategies do you use to give a successful talk? I generally adhere to the basic points raised by Uri Alon in his paper on “How to Give a Good Talk,” published in Molecular Cell Forum. For me, a key strategy is to always speak to a broad audience. Choose the scope of your talk carefully and define your system so that the audience can converge at the same conclusions.

What do you want to do after your postdoc? I intend to pursue an academic appointment as an assistant professor. Obtaining research funds as a non-U.S. citizen is challenging, but I plan to apply for the NIH K99 (Pathway to Independence) Award.

What are your non-work related interests? In my free time I enjoy just being with my wife and our dog, developing myself as an amateur classical pianist, and rock climbing.

Ami Bhatt – Award for Best Poster Presentation

3rd year postdoc in the laboratory of Dr. Matthew Meyerson, Department of Medical Oncology
MD, PhD from University of California San Francisco

Any special ways you plan to use your award? I took some of my lab friends out for a celebratory drink as a start.

How do you approach setbacks in your research (such as a failed experiment or negative results)? I try to look carefully at unexpected and negative results... some of my most interesting findings have resulted from making careful observations when experiments didn’t turn out the way I had expected!

What do you enjoy most about working at DFCI? The translational nature of the workplace makes it a very inspiring and productive place to work, especially for solving problems that directly relate to patient health. As a physician and a scientist, this is what I’ve really trained for my whole life – and I’m excited to actually be doing it!

Kristopher Sarosiek – Award for Best Oral Presentation

4th year postdoc in the laboratory of Dr. Anthony Letai, Department of Medical Oncology
PhD in Molecular and Cellular Biology from University of Miami

What did you like the most about the retreat? My favorite experience was talking to NCI Director Dr. Harold Varmus about our lab’s research and hearing his perspective about the state of cancer research today. I also enjoyed meeting other postdocs and graduate students and learning about their research.

Any special ways you plan to use your award? I’m very grateful that I received this generous award from the PGA. Our second daughter will be born soon, so the award will definitely come in handy!

What do you enjoy most about working at DFCI? I’m impressed and humbled by the intelligence, ambition, and caring, not only of our faculty, but also of the scores of postdocs, grad students, and staff. The people here nurture a collaborative atmosphere and are very committed to improving the lives of patients with cancer.

Triona Chonghaile – Award for Best Poster Presentation

5th year postdoc in the laboratory of Dr. Anthony Letai, Department of Medical Oncology
PhD in Biochemistry from the National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

What do you enjoy most about working at DFCI? There is a real can-do attitude towards science, and I have been lucky to be involved in some fascinating collaborations. I also think that it is an ideal environment for translational science. The fact that we are so closely linked to the hospital and the patients is really inspiring.

What do you want to do after your postdoc? I am currently applying for faculty positions and will possibly be returning to Ireland or moving to California. One of the challenges is re-establishing a network back home from here.

What are your non-work-related interests? Spending time with my husband, playing soccer, and skiing in the winter.
A Discussion on Mentoring with Dr. James Griffin

Dr. Griffin received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Brown University and completed an MD degree at Harvard Medical School, a residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital, a clinical fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital, and a research fellowship at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Dr. Griffin is a Professor of Medicine at HMS and the head of the Department of Medical Oncology at DFCI and BWH.

What is the importance of mentoring?

Mentoring is an essential skill; most postdoctoral fellows and predoctoral students need people to guide their thinking. Mentoring is a lot more than just teaching an individual how to use different techniques—it is really about having you learn how to approach and think about scientific problems, and how to take advantage of the resources that are available for your use; it involves learning how to form a network of collaboration. Good mentors also teach you their style of writing papers and grant proposals. Most importantly, you learn how to be a scientist.

What do you most value about the mentor-mentee relationship?

This relationship is definitely a two-way street; when you have the opportunity to mentor someone, you yourself also get a lot out of the relationship. First of all, they (both the mentor and the mentee) get to work together collaboratively, and hopefully productively, on a research project; this is what the mentor is interested in, and time invested in the relationship often pays off for him/her in a big way. The mentee gets good training and launches a good career, while the mentor gets to enjoy the fruits of that relationship.

If successful, the process can also be lots of fun. It is very gratifying for an investigator to have mentees who succeed, to watch their career evolve, and to see them settle into a good job. It is sort of like a parent-child relationship in that you hate to see them leave, but you are proud when they go off on their own and do well.

You talk about the rewards of mentoring; what then are the most challenging aspects of mentoring?

Well, no mentor is good at everything. If successful, the process can also be lots of fun. It is very gratifying for an investigator to have mentees who succeed, to watch their career evolve, and to see them settle into a good job. It is sort of like a parent-child relationship in that you hate to see them leave, but you are proud when they go off on their own and do well.

Do you think postdocs should more actively reach out to find additional mentors?

Absolutely. You have only one career, and assistance and advice can come from variety of different people. Postdocs who isolate themselves and do not take advantage of the wealth of faculty at an institution like Dana-Farber are missing good opportunities to improve on and accelerate their career.

If you were asked to offer one piece of advice to postdoctoral fellows with regard to choosing between a senior or young mentor, what would it be?

This is a good question. Senior mentors tend to have better networks, they have access to more resources, and they may be able to publish in better journals; however, the price a mentee might have to pay for this is a lack of full access to the mentor. As a mentee, you need to know what your own needs are; if you are self-sufficient and you know where your career should be going, and if you are already good at doing experiments, writing grant proposals and papers, then you will benefit from having a senior mentor.

On the other hand, when you are just starting out, it may be more advantageous to have someone who is more readily available—a young, rising star that is able to contribute a lot of time to your career, along with his/her own. I think it is a personal choice. It is important to explore a number of different mentors and laboratories before you pick one or more so that you find the best fit for yourself.

HOLIDAY COOKIE HOUR

Wed, 12/12/12 at 12:12 PM!

Stop by Smith 347 and celebrate the holiday cheer by enjoying cookies, desserts, coffee, and tea together with your coworkers and the PGA.

Special thanks to Jennifer Molina and Sonal Jhaveri. If you are interested in contributing to the PGA Newsletter, email us at dfci_pgapost@dfci.harvard.edu

Comments and suggestions are also welcomed!

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Curiosity Corner

The fairy dust of this year’s Nobel Prizes has fallen on cell reprogramming and G-protein coupled receptors. But did you know about the Ig Nobel Prizes in our own backyard? These prizes have been given every year since 1991 at Harvard’s Sanders Theater. They honor the scientific achievements that “first make people laugh, then make them think.” Here are some of the impressive breakthroughs from past events.

A group of American researchers won this year’s Neuroscience Prize for demonstrating that powerful technology does not always lead to meaningful results. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and simple statistics, they discovered brain activity in a dead salmon. (*J Serendipitous Unexpected Results*, 2010, 1(1):1)

The 2012 Medicine Prize went to a Dutch duo for discovering that asthma symptoms can be treated with a roller-coaster ride. (*Behav Res Ther*, 2006, 45:977) But don’t throw away your inhalers just yet, because this study only examined the perception of dyspnea (a symptom of asthma) in association with stress, which the researchers induced by giving patients roller-coaster rides.

The 2008 Biology Prize recognized a group of French scientists for discovering that the fleas that live on a dog can jump longer and higher than the fleas that live on a cat. (*Vet Parasitol*, 2000, 92(3):239) Who would have even imagined? But to be fair, they are two different species.

For more exciting research, check out their website at [www.improbable.com/ig/](http://www.improbable.com/ig/).

PGA Calendar

- **December 6, 2012** – Career Pathways & Networking
  - Time: 3:30 – 5:00 PM
  - Location: YCC 306

- **December 14, 2012** – Brain Lunch, featuring Austin Dulak, Ph.D.
  - Time: 12:00 – 1:00 PM
  - Location: SM 308/309


Tips for Traveling at Night

Winter has almost arrived. The days are shorter and the nights are longer, which means you have to travel alone in the dark after an entire day of exhausting experiments. For those of you who are terrified by the horror stories of street robbery, what can you do to make your graduate school or postdoctoral memory terror-free?

If you have a car, you can park for free in the Yawkey garage after hours (4 PM to 7 AM weekdays, and all day on weekends and holidays). All you need to do is to make a phone call to General Service (617-632-3134) to activate your ID for garage access. Or, if you don’t want to venture out mid-experiment to move your car at 4 PM, a taxi voucher (worth $10) can be obtained from the security desk in the lobby of the Yawkey building (from 8 PM to 6 AM). This may not be enough to take you all the way to your house in Belmont, but it is good enough to reach the nearest T station.

Similar to the cab voucher, there are dozens of other free shuttle services that could take you to the T stations. The advantage of the shuttles is that they all can be tracked in real-time on your browser or by using applications such as Transloc on your iPhone.

The Scientist survey on “Best Places to Work for Postdocs 2013” is now open. Fill out the survey before November 26 and you could win a $100 gift certificate from Amazon! [http://infopoll.net/live/surveys/s35987.htm](http://infopoll.net/live/surveys/s35987.htm)

PGA Hiking Trip to Blue Hills

The Friends’ Corner Gift Shop, located in Dana-Farber’s atrium lobby on Yawkey 1, offers a wide selection of unique gifts and everyday items for patients, families, and staff. You can purchase stamps, discount movie tickets ($6.75 per AMC/Regal ticket and $8.00 per Showcase ticket), Dana-Farber logo merchandise, and much more. **In case you are searching for a great present, DFCI postdocs and graduate students will receive a 20% discount on DFCI logo items for the next two weeks (from November 15 to November 30).** The gift shop is open from 9 AM to 5 PM – so stop by and get your Christmas shopping done early!