

Med School Watercooler

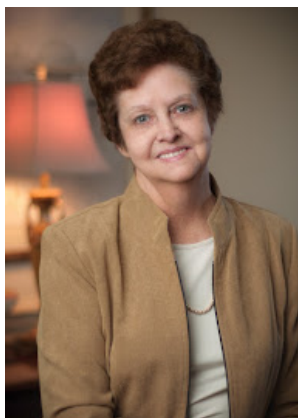
NEWS FROM FREDERICK P. WHIDDON COLLEGE OF MEDICINE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

Thursday, November 17, 2022

Sharing stories of gratitude

In this season of thankfulness, we asked alumni, medical and graduate students, faculty, staff and retirees from the Frederick P. Whiddon College of Medicine to send us their stories of gratitude. Below are the reflections they shared.

"I would like to offer a story of gratitude about Patricia Green, known to everyone as Pat. She was a former program coordinator for the Department of Internal Medicine Residency Program for many years and served the University of South Alabama for 35 years. She was always everyone's go-to person for questions and problems. I distinctly remember when I initially interviewed with John Bass, who was the chairman of the department, I mentioned that I was apprehensive about taking the job as program director, as I felt inexperienced and underqualified. John reassured me by saying, 'Don't worry, Tom; just ask Pat.'



Pat Green

"And indeed, as in most things, John Bass was exactly correct. All residents and medical students knew when they asked me something, my response was always 'let's ask Pat.' She was also a resource for other program coordinators and would always patiently assist anyone. She was the most knowledgeable, helpful, kindest and nicest person and was instrumental for many years in helping the Department of Internal Medicine achieve its goal of educating numerous medical students and residents.

"Sadly, Pat Green died on Oct. 7, 2021. But the University of South Alabama, its medical students, former residents, and faculty are immensely grateful for Pat Green's kindness, dedication and service. Thank you, Pat Green!"

– **Tom Montgomery, M.D.**, Class of 1981



Mark Scott

"There are so many people in Mobile to whom I owe gratitude that it would take the entire newsletter plus more to name each individually, so instead I would like to thank the USA COM for taking a risk with me. I was definitely a nontraditional student who had not found a place where she belonged until I began school at USA COM. I had changed my major several times in undergrad and even dropped out of college while trying to

figure out my life. I always had a love for science and medicine but didn't think that I was a good enough student or strong enough person to go to medical school. The day that I interviewed, Mark Scott met me on the front steps of the

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school, shook my hand and welcomed me as if we had been old friends. He was the first of many faculty, instructors, mentors and peers that lifted me up and guided me through the rigors of medical school. USA COM was the first experience where I felt that I truly belonged and was part of a community, and for this, I will be forever grateful."

– **Lynn Crawford, M.D.**, Class of 1999

"Dr. Wan Lim teaching Gross Anatomy to the Class of 2001 was awesome. She invited us over to bake cookies at her house, and for those students from out of town and couldn't make it home for the holidays, she would invite them to join her family gatherings. Of note, she also advised me not to change my last name when I got married to my classmate, and I have kept my maiden name. She was more than a professor – she was family.



Wan Lim, Ph.D.

"Dr. Michael Sternberg and Dr. Terry Phillip Bell, Department of Emergency Medicine, were always ready to mentor. When I was in undergraduate in the 1990s, everyone seemed so busy in the ER; but they both took the time to teach, regardless where you were in your training. Until this day, I and many other students are grateful for their dedication. They both made you feel a part of the team.

"Dr. Sidney Crosby – Family Medicine in Jackson, Alabama – gave me great insight into rural medicine in a small town. He and his family invited me to join them for church and Sunday lunch. I appreciated him making me a part of his family while I was away on my family medicine rotation in 2000.

"My husband, Brandon Mark Peters, and I (Romsel Ang) from the Class of 2001 appreciated Dr. Glenn Wilson, Dr. Susan LeDoux, Dr. Phillip Fields, and Dr. Wan Lim teaching Gross Anatomy and all the funny jokes right before lecture. They were passionate about their teaching and were always ready to help out in the gross lab. Until this day, we've both used what we learned in gross anatomy in each of our specialties."

– **Romsel Ang, M.D., and Brandon Mark Peters, M.D.**, Class of 2001



Benjamin Estrada, M.D.

"I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Benjamin Estrada. He was a fabulous teacher during medical school. More recently, his wisdom and guidance throughout the pandemic has been invaluable. Thank you, Dr. Estrada, for your advice, patience and positive attitude!"

– **Nancy Oppenheimer Wood, M.D.**, Class of 2007

"I'd like to recognize and thank Dr. T.J. Hundley, one of the associate deans in the medical school, who has helped numerous medical students walk through truly anything that comes up. From writing letters of recommendation when appropriate, to talking through things that we may be struggling with, to meeting with us to improve study strategies, Dr. Hundley has met us as students wherever we are and in whatever capacity we need help. He never complains when meetings with a student run late, as he sees it as his job to care for each of us. His commitment to advocacy, improvement of the curriculum for the sake of the students, and



T.J. Hundley, M.D.

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drive to propel each student forward has made him such a dear person in the hearts and minds of the Class of 2023."

– **Submitted by a member of the Class of 2023**



Jonathan Scammell, Ph.D.

"I came to work in the admissions office at the USA College of Medicine a little over 10 years ago. The support I've received from those in this office has been amazing. They encouraged me to go back to school and put up with my moaning and groaning about homework and tests, and they celebrated my graduation. They have allowed me to grow and progress as an employee and a person.

"Last summer, Mark Scott, now retired, Alani Rodgers, and, most importantly, Dr. Jonathan Scammell, stood by me and saw me through one of the darkest times of my life. I lost both my mother and my brother within 45 days of one another. I was devastated. Dr. Scammell sat down in my office one day and asked me a simple question, 'Are you talking to anyone?' to which I replied, 'I don't need anyone.' His question stayed with me, though; and as the pain and darkness grew, his question grew louder until finally, I found the strength to reach out and ask for help. His five simple words saved me. And for that, I am most thankful every single day."

– **Deborah Fetherland**, Director of Admissions, Whiddon College of Medicine

"The Whiddon College of Medicine Health Systems Grants Admin and Development Office wants to thank their executive director, Ashley Turbeville, for her mentoring and dedication. Ashley has been with the University of South Alabama since 1993. We value her tireless commitment to training and mentoring future researchers and administrative personnel. Thank you for all you do, Ashley!"

– **Office of Health Systems Grants Administration and Development**

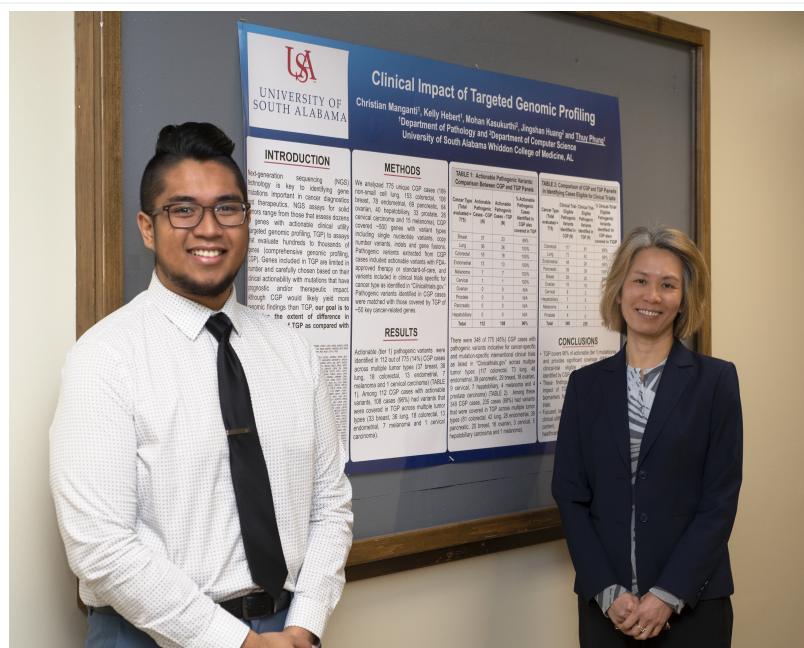


Ashley Turbeville

"I work in care access at the Mastin Building in Internal Medicine. I previously worked at University Hospital as a PCA on the fourth floor. I have worked in two very different environments within USA Health, and I would say the top two things I have been most thankful for are still the same. First, patients who are kind. I'm sure most of us know how it feels being on the other end of things and being the patient yourself. Second, coworkers who make you feel included. Working in healthcare can be super stressful. Having coworkers who care about you, treat you like family, help you, while never making you feel any less of a person/employee – it means the world. So I would say I am very thankful for the people out there with kind hearts, on both sides of healthcare!"

– **Ashlan Broadus**, Care Access, Department of Internal Medicine

Study assesses clinical impact of targeted genomic profiling



Christian Manganti, a third-year medical student, and Thuy Phung, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of pathology, display their poster describing the clinical impact of targeted genomic profiling.

Next-generation sequencing (NGS) technology is key to identifying gene mutations important in cancer diagnostics and therapeutics. Representatives from the Frederick P. Whiddon College of Medicine and the School of Computing at the University of South Alabama presented their clinical research findings on NGS at the Association for Molecular Pathology international annual meeting, held Nov. 1-5 in Phoenix, Arizona.

Christian Manganti, a third-year medical student, conducted research for the project, titled "Clinical Impact of Targeted Genomic Profiling," during the Medical Student Summer Research Program in 2021. He completed the work in the Molecular Pathology Laboratory under the direction of Thuy Phung, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of pathology at the Whiddon College of Medicine and director of molecular genetic pathology and dermatopathology at USA Health.

Next-generation sequencing assays for solid tumors range from targeted genomic profiling (TGP), which assesses dozens of genes with actionable clinical utility, to comprehensive genomic profiling (CGP), which evaluates hundreds to thousands of genes.

"NGS truly is the future of medicine," Manganti said. "Research continues to move towards identifying genetic associations with all types of disease states, even obesity."

However, genetic testing can be costly for patients and the healthcare system. "That's where targeted genomic profiling comes in; it's a very efficient solution," he said. "TGP is cost-effective, and our data supports that utilizing TGP in cancer patients provides important information that's pertinent to patient care."

The study found that TGP covers 96% of actionable mutations and provides significant coverage (68%) of clinical-trial-eligible pathogenic variants identified by CGP. These findings indicate significant clinical impact of TGP with respect to identifying biomarkers for targeted therapy and clinical trials. Focused, targeted gene profiling has important clinical utility in the setting of small tissue specimens, cost effectiveness and limited healthcare resources, the study concluded.

Phung was a featured speaker in a corporate workshop on "Improving Access to Precision Oncology Through In-House Plasma Biopsy Testing," in which she discussed the establishment of molecular cancer testing at USA Health and how in-house testing can lead to significant improvement in the quality of patient care. She was also invited to serve on several key committees for the Association for Molecular Pathology, and commenced her committee assignments at the association's annual meeting.

"It is an honor to represent the University of South Alabama and the Department of Pathology at an international molecular pathology conference to showcase what we are doing in Mobile to improve patient care locally, and to raise awareness of efficient and cost-effective means to improve patient access to lifesaving molecular testing," she said.



Thuy Phung, M.D., Ph.D., far right, spoke at a corporate workshop during the Association for Molecular Pathology annual meeting.

Manganti said he is grateful to Phung, the laboratory staff and the pathology department for sponsoring the project. "This is a completely new avenue in medicine that isn't quite covered in detail yet in our pre-clerkship years," he said. "Much of my learning during that summer occurred simply by interacting with my colleagues every day, and I'm grateful that they were so hospitable to me and open to answering any questions I had."

Collaborators on the interdisciplinary project included Kelly Hebert, Ph.D., lead molecular medical scientist; Mohan Kasukurthi, a doctoral candidate in computer science; and Jingshan Huang, Ph.D., professor of computer science.

AMP is the leading organization in the field of molecular diagnostics. The annual meeting, which attracts about 2,000 attendees from all over the world, explores how cutting-edge technology and developments in molecular testing and diagnostics impact patient care. The meeting consisted of three days of scientific sessions on molecular diagnostics with 200 exhibiting companies, a corporate workshop, and educational and networking opportunities.

Wednesday, November 16, 2022

Meet a Med Student: Kara Nix

Kara Nix

Age: 23

Class of: 2025

Hometown: Muscle Shoals, Alabama

Undergraduate institution and degree earned:

University of North Alabama, B.S. in industrial hygiene and chemistry

What do you enjoy most about being a medical student at the Whiddon College of Medicine?

I enjoy the smaller class sizes and how it breeds more camaraderie and collaboration between students instead of competition.



Are you involved in any research, organizations or other initiatives at the College of Medicine?

I am currently a Primary Care Pathway Scholar, one of our class Wellness Officers, fundraising chair for the Family Planning and Reproductive Health Interest Group, and part of the Culinary Medicine and Lifestyle Interest Group. The past two semesters, I've also volunteered at weekly English classes through Dwell Mobile.

What are your interests and hobbies?

I love anything outdoors, especially running in new places and hiking cool trails. Also, scoping out the next best iced almond milk latte is a favorite (albeit expensive) pastime of mine.

What is something unique about you?

I ran a full marathon while in college (spoiler alert: it hurt).



Prakash awarded 2022 Mayer Mitchell Award for Excellence in Cancer Research



From left, Richard Honkanen, Ph.D., professor and chair of biochemistry and molecular biology; Ash Prakash, Ph.D., associate professor of biochemistry and molecular biology; Arlene Mitchell; and Martin Heslin, M.D., M.S.H.A., director of the USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute. Prakash is the 2022 recipient of the Mayer Mitchell Award for Excellence in Cancer Research.

Cancer researcher Aishwarya Prakash, Ph.D., has been named the recipient of the 2022 Mayer Mitchell Award for Excellence in Cancer Research.

Prakash is an associate professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at the Frederick P. Whiddon College of Medicine and heads the structural biology facility at the USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute.

The \$10,000 award is presented annually to a promising scientist at the Mitchell Cancer Institute upon the recommendation of a faculty committee. The award was established in 2009 by University of South Alabama Trustee Arlene Mitchell in memory of her late husband, Mayer Mitchell, a Mobile businessman, longtime USA trustee and formative figure in the establishment of the MCI.



"Dr. Prakash is very deserving of this award. She is a diligent and innovative researcher who also is committed to mentoring and educating young scientists at the Whiddon College of Medicine," said John V. Marymont, M.D., M.B.A., dean of the Whiddon College of Medicine and vice president for medical affairs.

Since joining the MCI in 2016, Prakash has focused her lab on environmental agents that induce DNA damage and their impact on cancer formation and progression.

Supported by grant funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), Prakash conducts structural and functional studies of DNA repair complexes in the mitochondria. She also studies gene-environment interactions that drive cancer progression in individuals with Lynch syndrome, a DNA repair deficiency syndrome that puts people at a much higher risk for certain cancers.

Prakash also collaborates with researchers at the University of Arizona to uncover the genetic and environmental causes of lupus, a project that is also supported by the NIEHS.

"We are grateful to have Dr. Prakash at the MCI, where her bright and positive disposition as well as her many contributions to all aspects of academic success are felt on a daily basis," said Martin J. Heslin, M.D., MSHA, executive director of the MCI.

Prakash earned her Ph.D. in cancer biology at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in 2010. She then received training as a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Vermont in the fields of DNA repair and X-ray crystallography. She also received specialized training in X-ray crystallography at the Brookhaven National Labs in Long Island, New York.

Prakash participates in many national and international organizations. She is a council member of the Environmental Mutagenesis and Genomics Society (EMGS) and has been appointed to a one-year term on the EMGS Executive Board. She was awarded the EMGS Young Scientist Award in 2018 and was selected as the Young Investigator co-chair for the EMGS Annual Meeting in 2020. She also served as co-chair of the DNA repair special interest group and the Women in the EMGS, both three-year commitments.

At the Whiddon College of Medicine, Prakash currently serves as vice president of the Faculty Assembly and is a member of the Graduate Council.

Wattenbarger joins emergency medicine faculty

Sara Wattenbarger, D.O., was introduced to emergency medicine early in life.

When she was about 11 years old, she started portraying a standardized patient for her mother and stepfather who were both paramedics and involved in EMS education. Later, she became an EMT herself, working shifts for an ambulance company and as an emergency room tech throughout college.

Now, Wattenbarger is an emergency medicine physician at USA Health University Hospital, supporting patients and their family members on what may be the worst day of their lives. "It can be incredibly difficult at times, but it is also an honor to be entrusted in that way," she said.



With a love for teaching, Wattenbarger said she enjoys working in an academic health system, where she is also an assistant professor of emergency medicine at the Frederick P. Whiddon College of Medicine at the University of South Alabama.

"I wanted to find a location that would not only allow me to use my clinical skills in caring for patients from diverse backgrounds and with complex medical problems, but also to work with residents and medical students," she said. "I saw USA Health as an opportunity to build on my strengths in both areas, growing as a clinician as well as an educator."

In addition to her clinical duties, she teaches and mentors residents and medical students, moderates a portion of the department's weekly academic forums, gives lectures and serves on several committees, and assists with residency candidate interviews.

Wattenbarger earned her medical degree from the Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine, part of Midwestern University in Glendale, Arizona. "I tried on many specialty 'hats' during medical school but always kept coming back to ER," she said.

She went on to complete her residency training in emergency medicine at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center in Colton, California. She is currently in the Master of Academic Medicine Program at Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California.

Prior to joining USA, Wattenbarger served on the core residency faculty and was an attending physician at Kaweah Health Medical Center in Visalia, California.

Wattenbarger is a Diplomate of the American Board of Emergency Medicine and a Fellow of the American College of Emergency Physicians. She is a member of the Society of Academic Emergency Medicine, the American Osteopathic Association, and the American Medical Association.

In her spare time, she enjoys spending time with her husband, their 18-month-old son and three dogs.

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