

Meet Damon Runyon's Newest Class of SPARK Scholars in Cancer Research

SPARK Scholars will conduct research in the labs of current or former Damon Runyon cancer scientists.

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The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation has named the newest cohort of the Damon Runyon Scholars Program for Advancing Research and Knowledge (SPARK), a one-year cancer research internship for post-baccalaureate scholars. Launched in 2023, the program provides promising young talent with rigorous scientific training and a network of mentors and peers to support their next steps into graduate school and beyond.

SPARK Scholars will conduct research in the labs of current or former Damon Runyon scientists at partnering institutions around the country. Each Scholar will receive a stipend of up to \$50,000, along with a living allowance and a travel stipend. Throughout the year, they will gather for unique programming to foster community among the cohort and strengthen the skills needed for a research career. They also had the opportunity to present a poster at the annual Damon Runyon Fellows' Retreat alongside other Damon Runyon scientists this past September.

"Early-stage mentorship can really make or break a person in terms of what they choose to pursue," says Katelyn King, one of the inaugural SPARK Scholars and a current PhD student at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. "When I eventually have my own lab, I hope that's something I can bring to the next generation of scientists."

2025 Damon Runyon SPARK Scholars

Isabella Alves [National Mah Jongg League Scholar] with her mentor Christina M. Termini, PhD (Damon Runyon Fellow '18-'21), at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center, Seattle

Isabella was born and raised in Puyallup, Washington. She graduated from Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, with a BS in Biological Sciences with minors in Chemistry and Business Administration. Her motivation to pursue cancer research stems from her own health struggles, which sparked a strong interest in human health and biology from an early age. Over time, that interest has evolved into a deep intellectual curiosity about the molecular mechanisms of cancer. During her undergraduate studies, she had the opportunity to work as a summer intern in the laboratory of Christina M. Termini, PhD, where she investigated how inhibiting isoprenoid production impacts hematopoietic stem cell (HSC) maintenance, expansion, and survival. Her ultimate goal is to contribute meaningfully to improving patient outcomes by developing safe, accessible, and effective cancer treatments. Outside the lab, she enjoys being outdoors, cooking, dancing, and spending quality time with her family.

Subyeta Chowdhury with her mentor Ross L. Levine, MD (Damon Runyon Clinical Investigator Award Committee Member), at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York

Subyeta is a graduate of the Macaulay Honors College at Hunter College, New York, where she earned a BA in Biological Sciences with a minor in Public Health. Born and raised in New York City, Subyeta's personal medical experiences exposed her to the profound impact of medicine and scientific discovery. These experiences, coupled with clinical volunteer work in hospitals and nursing homes, solidified her aspiration to pursue a career that intersects both cancer research and medicine. She explored this passion through research experiences in Dr. Ross Levine's lab at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, where she contributed to projects focused on acute myeloid leukemia. In the summer of 2024, she deepened her research experience as a Harvard-Amgen Scholar at Boston Children's Hospital, studying clonal hematopoiesis in the lab of Dr. Vijay G. Sankaran, current Sponsor to a Damon Runyon Fellow and Damon Runyon-St. Jude Fellow. Subyeta's research efforts were recognized with the Horace W. Goldsmith Scholar Award from Macaulay Honors College. In her free time, she enjoys exploring New York City, building Legos, and unwinding with a good movie.

Milen Negasi [National Mah Jongg League Scholar] with her mentor Xin Gu, PhD (Damon Runyon-National Mah Jongg League Fellow '22-'24; Damon Runyon-Dale F. Frey Breakthrough Scientist '25-'27), at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston

Milen was born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, to parents who emigrated from Eritrea. As an undergraduate at Harvard College, where she majored in Neuroscience and minored in Global Health and Health Policy, she became interested in the phenomena of neurodevelopment and neuroplasticity. Seeking deeper insight into these processes, she joined the lab of Dr. Michael E. Greenberg at Harvard Medical School (HMS) and conducted research under Dr. Xin Gu (who was a Damon Runyon Fellow at that time). There, she investigated the function of the protein midnolin and explored its structural, spatial, and physiological properties, elucidating its regulation of key neuronal proteins. This research earned her the HMS "Outstanding Undergraduate Research Award in the Lefler Center" and the Harvard "Herchel Smith Undergraduate Science Fellowship." Working in Dr. Gu's independent lab at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, her scientific interests have widened from neuroscience to the broader processes of cellular growth, development, and death. She is drawn to the field of cancer biology not only for its scientific complexity but also for its human urgency and its therapeutic potential to prevent people's stories from being cut too short. Outside of the lab, Milen immerses herself in the arts through volunteer work with local museums, creates her own art, and serves as paint charge for several student-run theatrical productions.

Imani Williams with her mentor Ralph J. DeBerardinis, MD, PhD (Damon Runyon Clinical Investigator '11-'14; Damon Runyon Clinical Investigator Award Committee Member), at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas

Imani was born and raised in Newport News, Virginia. She attended Howard University, Washington, D.C., as a first-generation college student, earning her BS in Biology with Chemistry and Psychology minors. After graduation, she was selected as a trainee for the New York Research and Mentoring for Post Baccalaureates (NY-RaMP) Program at Hunter College, New York. She worked in Dr. Jill Bargonetti's (Damon Runyon Fellow '91-'94) lab, where she focused her efforts on the study of triple-negative breast cancer research and became passionate about cancer research. She is driven by the challenge of questioning conventional wisdom and exploring seemingly implausible possibilities. She is inspired by the opportunity to reshape the future of medicine, leveraging these innovations for the benefit of all patients. Imani is committed to advocating for those in need, and she believes that pursuing cancer research will allow her to make the most meaningful impact in society.

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