

Meet the Inaugural Class of SPARK Cancer Research Scholars

Damon Runyon launched the one-year intensive cancer research internship program for post-baccalaureate students.

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The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation has named the first cohort of the Damon Runyon Scholars Program for Advancing Research and Knowledge (SPARK), a one-year intensive cancer research internship program for post-baccalaureate students who come from varied backgrounds. The goal of the program is to provide young trainees who have the potential to become leaders in cancer research 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 lab of a current or former Damon Runyon scientist at a partnering institution 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 to be successful in a research career. They will also have the opportunity to present a poster at the Annual Damon Runyon Fellows' Retreat alongside their mentors and other Damon Runyon scientists.

The three-year pilot program begins this year with four inaugural Scholars, selected by a distinguished committee of experts in the field.

2024 Damon Runyon SPARK Scholars

Sangita Chakraborty

Courtesy of Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation

Sangita Chakraborty is a recent graduate of Hunter College, where she earned a dual degree in Biological Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies with a minor in Public Policy. Born in Bangladesh, Sangita immigrated to Queens, New York with her family when she was four years old. After losing an aunt to cancer when she was in high school, she set out to pursue a career in cancer research as a physician-scientist. For her, the motivation was both personal and intellectual.

“I am deeply intrigued by the dynamic nature of cancer, particularly the adaptability and resilience exhibited by cancer cells,” she says. “This fascination impels me to investigate.”

As a SPARK Scholar, Sangita will join the lab of Lydia Finley, PhD (Damon Runyon Fellow '13-'17, Dale Frey Breakthrough Scientist '17-'19) at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, where she will study how cellular metabolic pathways regulate cell differentiation in stem cells and cancer cells. A mentor herself to elementary and middle school students throughout New York City public schools, she knows how transformative the mentor-mentee relationship can be.

Katelyn King

Courtesy of Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation

Katelyn King holds a degree in Biology from Emory University. A Georgia native, Katelyn enrolled at Albany State University while she was still in high school, graduating in 2020 with both her high school diploma and an Associate of Sciences.

As she now embarks on a research career, Katelyn is driven by the desire to understand and mitigate health disparities, especially the disproportionate impact of certain cancers on Black individuals. This fall, she will join the lab of Kornelia Polyak, MD, PhD (Clinical Investigator Award Committee Member '09-'17, Physician-Scientist Training Award Committee Member '15-'22), at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, where she will contribute to the team's molecular analysis of human breast cancer—a disease with an alarming and persistent mortality gap between Black women and white women.

“I aspire to help create a more diverse and inclusive biomedical research community, one that

actively works to reduce disparities in disease incidence and treatment outcomes,” she writes.

In her free time, Katelyn enjoys spending time with her family and dog Fluffy, playing video games, and practicing the piano.

Jayati Mondal

Courtesy of Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation

Jayati Mondal graduated from Hunter College in May with a degree in Biological Sciences. Growing up in Bangladesh and seeing her father practice medicine as a cardiologist, she was drawn toward science at an early age. Though her father could no longer practice when the family moved to the United States, he continued to encourage her interest in biology. When her great-grandmother’s cancer metastasized to her brain in 2018, Jayati personally reached out to a neurooncologist, hoping to understand the diagnosis better.

As an undergraduate, Jayati joined the lab of Andrew L. Wolfe, PhD (Damon Runyon Fellow ’15-’18), where she explored the potential of peptide nucleic acids to target lung and colorectal cancer cells with KRAS mutations. She will now return to the Wolfe Lab as a SPARK Scholar and continue making meaningful contributions toward this research.

“If you had asked me three years ago, I would have envisioned myself working in a hospital or a private medical practice,” she says. “But my research experience has altered my perspective. Now, I envision my future encompassing both research and patient care.”

Carli Newman

Courtesy of Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation

Carli Newman is a recent graduate of Reed College, where she received her B.A. in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. A cancer survivor herself, she is motivated by her own experience with the disease and her connections with other patients and families to help develop more efficient treatments with fewer side effects.

The human impact of cancer, always at the forefront of her attention, inspired her to volunteer as a pediatric oncology summer camp staff member and fundraising organizer with The Goodtimes Project. Since graduating from college, Carli has worked at the Seattle Children's Research Institute with Jay Sarthy, MD, PhD, (Damon Runyon-Sohn Fellow '18-'22), conducting research to drive an effective chemotherapy agent with fewer toxicities to the clinic.

In the fall, she will join the lab of Christina M. Termini, PhD (Damon Runyon Fellow '18-'21), at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center, where she will investigate the processes that coordinate blood stem cell function during homeostasis, stress, and disease.

Carli is originally from Whidbey Island, WA, where she was first introduced to many of her hobbies, including kayaking, playing ultimate frisbee, climbing, reading, and music.

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