On the Shoulders of Giants

January 19, 2018 By Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation

DR: How is Damon Runyon different from other award programs?

Damon Runyon creates a community of fellows, a unique feature of the fellowship. It's an amazing network to be able to access. Once a Damon Runyon fellow, always a Damon Runyon fellow!

DR: What role did mentoring play in your own early career?

My graduate advisor, Ralph Yount, was like a second father to me. He was incredibly patient and amazingly helpful with paper writing and rigorous experiment planning. And being a great critic. He was very much about building a lab team. Our lab did lots of social things. My post doc advisor, George Stark, had a different philosophy—learn from watching me. He inspired me by his no fear approach to developing new and entrepreneurial technologies for important biological problems. Mentoring isn't just about the relationship between the mentor and the student. It's about creating an environment for everyone to succeed and be mentors to one another.

DR: Why do you continue to host Damon Runyon fellows in your lab?

Damon Runyon is at the top of the most prestigious postdoctoral fellowships you can get. When fellows see each other, they know it's a privilege to have gotten the award.

Because of the way the field is moving, my post-docs feel they can make a difference within a short time frame in their cancer research. All of my Damon Runyon fellows are focused on How can my research make a difference for people?

Thoughts from Jim's former Damon Runyon fellows about how his mentorship shaped their careers and leadership styles.

Michelle Arkin, PhD, former fellow and current professor of pharmaceutical chemistry at UCSF: Jim's mentorship has shaped my career dramatically. As a fellow, I was able to redirect my research from fundamental biophysics to a focus on human health. My lab still uses many of the approaches and philosophy gained in Jim's lab. When I was ready to move from industry to academics, he hired me to build the Small Molecule Discovery Center (SMDC) at UCSF. At multiple stages of my career, Jim has supported my growth and independence. Thanks to his mentorship, I am now a professor and co-directing the SMDC.

Arun Wiita, MD, PhD, former fellow and Damon Runyon–Dale F. Frey Breakthrough

Scientist, and current assistant professor at UCSF: Jim has been, and continues to be, a fantastic mentor. He knows the right way to approach running the lab: with infectious enthusiasm for science and a positive attitude. I absolutely do the same with my group. Furthermore, he showed the value of the “big idea.” He seeds his trainees with a cool concept and lets them run with it—trust smart people to do good science, give guidance with a light touch, and don’t micromanage. He’s incredibly supportive of his trainees. He helped me every step of the way in making the transition from Fellow to Assistant Professor. Furthermore, he offered open and honest discussions about which projects I could “take with me” when starting my own group, and he was very generous in this regard. I still absolutely value his friendship, and I am fortunate to get regular, informal mentoring on the tennis court (where he can still beat me!).

Nathan Thomsen, PhD, former fellow and current research scientist at Gilead Sciences, Inc.: I joined Jim’s lab, in part, due to his excellent reputation as a mentor—someone who would go to bat for his mentees and consider their goals and interests in addition to his own when formulating research and career development plans. Discussions with Jim don’t involve prior assumptions of academic or industry career paths, but rather an open discussion of paths available. The way it should be done! For me, this led to an instant feeling of mutual respect and trust, something that is critical for a successful mentor/mentee relationship. Because of these characteristics, Jim has directly shaped my career, helping me develop research plans that would fit my skill set and career interests, helping me identify an ideal career path, supporting me as I applied for positions in academia and industry, and remaining available for discussions and advice long after I took my current position at Gilead.

This article was originally published by the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation. It is reprinted with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/shoulders-giants