

COMMUNITY

for a **CURE**



Message from the Director



As we begin to near the end of the year, I want to express my gratitude to the exceptional clinicians, scientists, nurses, staff, and volunteers at USC Norris who dedicate their time, energy, and spirit to making cancer a disease of the past, and to the friends of USC Norris who support these efforts. Thank you for helping us make strides forward in cancer research and care. Your dedication allows the USC Norris team to generate groundbreaking research to develop new approaches to prevent, diagnose, and treat cancer. With your continued support, we are conquering the most challenging cancers and helping countless patients and their families for years to come.

No matter the holiday celebrated in your home this season, I hope it is filled with peace, joy, and love. Please click the link below for a special video message.

Video Link: [With Gratitude from the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center!](#)

Caryn Lerman

Caryn Lerman, PhD
Director, USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center
Associate Dean for Cancer Programs
H. Leslie and Elaine S. Hoffman Cancer Research Chair
Provost Distinguished Professor



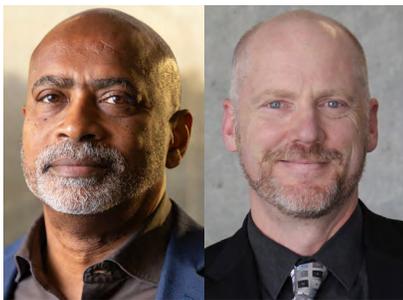
Cancer Disparities Research



Congratulations to Dr. Jennifer Tsui who received a major grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration in collaboration with the Chinatown Service Center, a federally qualified healthcare center. This project aims to improve rates of cervical cancer screening, HPV vaccination, and access to diagnostic follow-up and treatment in underserved populations in Los Angeles County. Other USC Norris contributors include Drs. Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati and Chanita Hughes-Halbert. Learn more about this grant here: <https://tinyurl.com/338wrwkv>.



Congratulations to Dr. Hughes-Halbert and Joi Torrence-Hill who received the American Cancer Society Navigation Capacity-Building Grant which will allow them to use data-driven navigation to address cancer health disparities with a focus on social determinants of health (SDOH) and integration of SDOH into clinical workflows and clinical trials.



Congratulations to USC Norris members Drs. Myles Cockburn and Ricky Bluthenthal who were awarded a supplement to the NCI P30 Cancer Center Support Grant to improve our understanding of the cancer burden in sexual/gender minority (SGM) individuals. The project will incorporate data on sexual orientation and gender identity into cancer research and patient care to foster meeting the needs of this community.



Congratulations to USC Norris members Drs. Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati and Mariana Stern who were awarded a supplement to the NCI Moonshot grant to reduce colorectal cancer disparities by fostering participation in cancer genomics research and genetic testing and counseling among Hispanic patients.

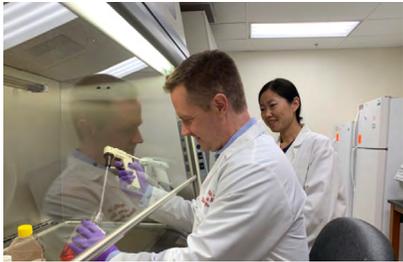


Published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, Dr. Chanita Hughes-Halbert writes a commentary on the social determinants of health and cancer care and how they contribute to disease risk and healthcare outcomes. She outlines several important methods that are utilized to characterize the landscape of past and current research on social risks and needs in cancer care. These methods could be replicated by other National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded centers and organizations that fund cancer research to develop a more robust understanding of the investments that have been made to understand and address social risks as part of cancer care. To read the full article, go here: <https://academic.oup.com/jnci/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jnci/djac175/6694052>.

Additional New Grants



Under the leadership of Drs. Cockburn and Lerman, USC Norris received a grant from American Cancer Society to support innovative cancer research projects for early-stage investigators at USC Norris. The funding will foster the career evolution of the next generation of cancer researchers, a key mission of the Cancer Center.



Dr. Kevin Kelly, member of the USC Norris Translational and Clinical Sciences Program, has been awarded \$150,000 by the PHASE ONE Foundation to fund a phase II study investigating the efficacy of a novel combination of drugs to treat relapsed and refractory multiple myeloma. To learn more, go here: <https://tinyurl.com/mb2z37nh>.



Congratulations to USC Norris members Drs. Julio Camarero and Ite Offringa who were awarded a Lung Cancer Discovery Research Grant from the American Lung Association to study the therapeutic targeting of a novel inhibitor therapy to treat lung cancer.

Honors and Recognitions



Dr. Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati served on the steering committee of the most recent 2022 Cancer Progress Report of the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) which highlights the tremendous advances in science, new treatments, and technology of the last decade. To read the full report, go here: <https://tinyurl.com/mr264edp>.



Congratulations to Dr. John Carpten, Associate Director for Basic Science, who has been awarded the Simon M. Shubitz Prize Lecture and Award by the University of Chicago Medicine Comprehensive Cancer Center Foundation. This award recognizes excellence in cancer research and scientists who have made significant contributions to the study of cancer.

Scientific Advances



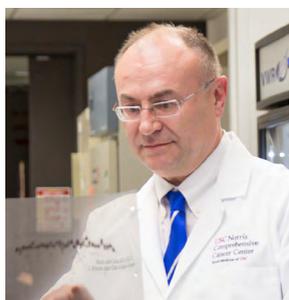
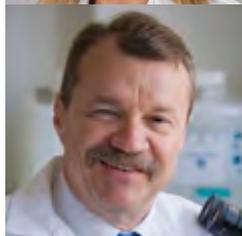
USC Norris members discover a novel association between smoking and HER2-type young-onset breast cancer

Published in the journal *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*, USC Norris members Drs. Ann Hamilton, Jennifer Unger, and Michael Press discovered a novel association between smoking and HER2-type early-onset breast cancer. Preventing smoking initiation and encouraging smoking cessation early in life are necessary to reduce the risk of adverse health outcomes, including cancer. To read the full publication, go here: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10549-022-06675-4>.



“ These findings underscore the need for effective smoking prevention and cessation interventions. Any amount of smoking, even a brief duration of smoking in adolescence or young adulthood, is harmful.”

-Jennifer Unger, PhD



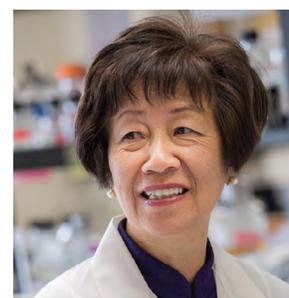
Dr. Heinz-Josef Lenz, Deputy Director for Research Programs at USC Norris, publishes on the role of neurotransmitters in colorectal cancer biology and treatment

Published in *Oncogene*, Dr. Lenz, provides an overview of the current evidence supporting the role of neurotransmitters in colorectal cancer biology and treatment. Pharmacological targeting of neurotransmitter signaling represent a promising novel anticancer approach. Read the full publication here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41388-022-02479-4>.

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“ Our data show that nerves in the tumor microenvironment may play a significant role in the biology and treatment of colorectal cancer and represent a novel area of research that may hold revolutionary targets for drug development.”

- Heinz-Josef Lenz, MD



Dr. Amy Lee revealed GRP78 suppresses oncogenic KRAS protein expression and reduces viability of cancer cells bearing various KRAS mutations

Published in the journal *Neoplasia*, Dr. Amy Lee, USC Norris member, and her colleagues revealed that GRP78 is a regulator of oncogenic KRAS expression and augments the other anti-cancer activities of GRP78 small molecule inhibitors to suppress tumor growth in certain cancers. Read the full publication here: <https://tinyurl.com/2697kd3p>.

“ Our study showing that newly discovered anti-GRP78 small molecule inhibitors can reduce viability of human lung, colon, and pancreatic cancer cells bearing various KRAS mutations offers a new tool to combat these deadly cancers.”

- Amy Lee, PhD



Dr. W. Martin Kast discovers that selection of a therapeutic vaccine schedule can influence the magnitude, efficacy, and durability of immune responses

Published in the journal *Cancers*, Dr. Kast, leader of the USC Norris Tumor Microenvironment Program, and his colleagues found that a one-week time period between getting vaccinated and boosted is minimally required to induce anti-tumor activity when using a therapeutic vaccine for HPV related cancers, but that longer time periods of up to four weeks are superior to induce lasting immune responses.

Read the full publication here: <https://tinyurl.com/hvycr7hf>.

“ These findings have implications for therapeutic vaccine clinical trials in which shorter intervals of prime-boost regimens may lead to suboptimal durable immune responses.”

- W. Martin Kast, PhD

Community Outreach and Engagement:



Taste of Soul Event

On Saturday, October 15, 2022, Dr. Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati, Associate Director of Community Outreach & Engagement (COE) at USC Norris, and the COE team were present at the 2022 Taste of Soul event in Los Angeles. They shared educational materials to foster cancer prevention and wellness for our community, including information on the new Lazarex Cancer Wellness Hubs throughout Los Angeles.

USC Norris Adult and Young Adult Cancer Program



4th Annual Getaway Retreat

Thanks to the support from the Audrey Irmas Foundation for Social Justice, a group of young adult cancer patients, survivors, and childhood cancer survivors enjoyed the 4th Annual USC Norris Adult and Young Adult Cancer Program Getaway Retreat in the fall. This retreat is an opportunity for young adult cancer patients and survivors to create a supportive community, learn new talents, and relax in a healing and beautiful setting. This retreat was free for young adult cancer patients/survivors (ages 18-39).



Zootopia

Thanks to the generous support from the Concern Foundation for Cancer Research, the USC Norris Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Program hosted a fun filled Zootopia Day at the Los Angeles Zoo. Young adults with cancer (ages 18-39) and their children and family members enjoyed free zoo admission, a catered gourmet BBQ lunch, and group activities at the beautiful Children's Discovery Center at the Los Angeles Zoo.

Faculty Spotlight



Heinz-Josef Lenz, Deputy Director for Research Programs and co-director for the Rosalie and Harold Rae Brown Center for Cancer Drug Development (CCDD)

Dr. Lenz has dedicated his life to helping patients with gastrointestinal (GI) cancers, not only his current patients, but also anyone who may one day face a diagnosis in the future. He is an internationally recognized transformational clinical investigator, translational scientist, and physician expert whose research has influenced treatment guidelines and therapeutic development. Dr. Lenz received his medical degree from Johannes-Gutenberg Universität in Mainz, Germany, in 1985. He completed a residency in Hematology and Oncology at the University Hospital Tübingen in Germany, a clerkship in Oncology at George Washington University in Washington, DC, and a clerkship in Hematology at Beth Israel Hospital of Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts. He served subsequent fellowships in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

“When my dad became sick with life threatening hepatitis, I spent a lot of time in the hospital and realized that I wanted to help patients,” said Dr. Lenz, who also serves as professor of medicine at Keck School of Medicine of USC, where he holds the J. Terrence Lanni Chair in Gastrointestinal Cancer Research. **“After medical school, residency, and fellowship, I decided to come to USC in 1991 to learn a cutting-edge technology which revolutionized translational research and changed the way colon cancers are characterized. This research was the beginning of molecular testing in GI cancers.”**

His transformative research focuses on the genetic underpinnings of drug resistance and therapeutic response among patients with colorectal cancer (CRC). Dr. Lenz’s National Cancer Institute-funded laboratory is developing novel agents in his preclinical models in GI cancer. Dr. Lenz was the first to measure intratumoral RNA levels associated with efficacy of 5-FU and oxaliplatin, a treatment for colon cancer, and led the first prospective randomized phase II trials using gene expression from formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) specimens. In addition, Dr. Lenz also discovered



that primary tumor location of CRC is an independent predictive and prognostic marker, a discovery that has adjusted the National Comprehensive Cancer Network® guidelines. His research illustrating that consensus molecular subtyping identified novel subgroups that are predictive and prognostic in CRC is now used globally in drug development. Moreover, with the support from an \$18.5 million grant from the National Cancer Institute (NCI), as part of the Cancer Moonshot, Dr. Lenz along with Dr. John Carpten and several colleagues from USC Norris are reducing cancer health disparities in colorectal cancer among Hispanic patients by increasing engagement in genomic testing.

“I have always wanted to find the cure for colon cancer,” said Dr. Lenz. **“Our approach is unique as we use clinical observations to identify novel targets allowing promising early drug development using our preclinical models. Our research is truly bedside to bench to bedside research.”**

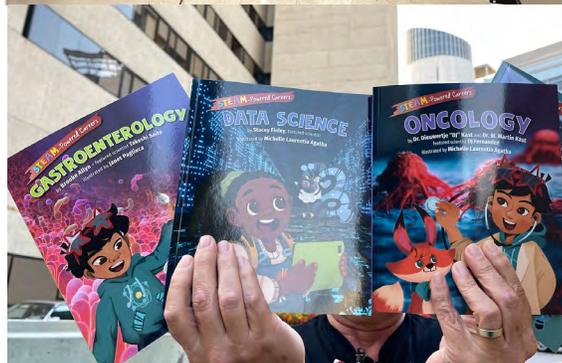
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Dr. Lenz also accelerates translational and clinical research and provides training and mentoring in the design and implementation of investigator-initiated trials. He was the recipient of the Provost Faculty Mentoring Award in 2021 for going above and beyond what is expected, fostering an engaging, supportive, and inclusive academic environment through his mentorship. In addition, he was awarded a Career Development Award from STOP CANCER (1994-1997). Based on his research, he also received a Young Investigator Award from the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) in 1994. In 1995, Dr. Lenz was selected for the prestigious ASCO Career Development Award, as well as an NIH Mid-Career Development Award in 1998. Over his career, he has published over 450 peer reviewed manuscripts and has been recognized as Highly Cited Researcher in 2022 by Clarivate.

STEAM Career Children's Book Series



USC Norris' work to improve cancer equity starts early. To address underrepresentation of individuals from ethnic and minority populations in academic cancer research and in science more broadly, USC Norris members Drs. Martin Kast, Stacy Finley, and Takeshi Saito collaborated with Dr. Dieuwertje "DJ" Kast to create a collection of informative and illustrative children's books. With the input of a diverse group of scientists, these books explore topics in the science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) fields to inspire readers to consider STEAM opportunities. Digital copies of the books are available on the [Room to Read](#) website and available in English and Spanish.



"It is a huge honor to contribute to this initiative to show that STEAM careers are accessible to everyone," said Dr. Finley, author and featured scientist of the Data Science book. **"When the students received the books, they were amazed to see diverse scientists! 'Representation matters' is not a cliché - kids need to see what's possible in order to strive for it. I am sure the books will have a real, long-lasting impact."**

On October 14th, the Dr. Theodore Alexander California Science Center School (CSC) hosted an oncology themed book assembly featuring authors Drs. DJ and Martin Kast and the featured scientist Daniel "DJ" Fernandez, who works in Dr. Kast's lab on HPV induced cervical cancer. They distributed over 800 English and Spanish versions of all the books in the series! During the assembly, the elementary students grabbed their oncology book and read along with the authors.



"Sharing that moment with the kids was thrilling and inspiring for everyone in the room," said DJ Fernandez. **"The students that approached me at the end were bursting with curiosity and excitedly fantasizing about the future and their role in it. It's assemblies like these that laid the foundation for my aspirations as a child and seeing it happening to the students in front of me is invigorating!"**

The Survivor Art Series: Jasveer Virk



Dr. Jasveer Virk was born and raised in London, England and migrated to California with her parents at the age of sixteen. Dr. Virk has professional expertise in maternal and child health outcomes, holds a doctorate in Epidemiology and Public Health, and is published in peer-reviewed medical journals.

In the summer of 2015, Dr. Jasveer Virk was on vacation with her family when she felt a large lump under her arm. She was later diagnosed with stage three breast cancer and a brain metastasis twenty months later. Dr. Virk was devastated by her diagnosis, but she knew she did not want to sit in despair. She began her search for outlets that would help her heal and cope with her diagnosis and the impact it made on her life. She began her work in ceramics as a healing modality after receiving her diagnosis and taking a hiatus from her research career.

“The healing modalities I leaned on allowed for more play, more joy, and more comfort,” said Dr. Virk. **“Cancer created an opening, and I felt the need to lean into something. Clay work and dance provided those things. I realized whatever I did, I needed to approach with full authenticity. There is full authenticity in my work. It expresses who I am, what I am, and who I am becoming.”**

The stillness and concentration required in clay work encouraged Dr. Virk to focus even more on the present, and this practice quickly became a meditative inquiry. She finds both the challenge of working with - and the infinite possibilities of - this ancient practice a reminder of the fragility of life and the strength of the human spirit. In addition to her clay work, she rediscovered ballroom dance as a powerful antidote to cancer and competes professionally in local events.

“Often in life we notice flaws in ourselves and in others, but when you dance with someone, you see them for their truth and you see them as a divine being,” said Dr. Virk. **“There’s an exchange of energy that becomes woven together, and for a few perfect moments, everything is in sync and harmonious. That is a powerful emotion to experience when overcoming trauma.”**

Dr. Virk and her artwork were recently featured in the 20th exhibition opening of *The Survivor Art Series*, a USC Norris program showcasing the artwork of artists diagnosed with cancer. Patients, families, faculty, staff, students, and the community at large are invited to attend, and this series is offered at no cost to the public.



“I was nervous about speaking publicly and sharing my experience,” said Dr. Virk. **“More than anything, I wanted to express a narrative that was truthful and share my perspective. I wanted to do my story justice. *The Survivor Art Series* created a space for me to share; everyone was fully present to hear my story, and all that I shared felt significant and meaningful.”**

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Her participation in *The Survivor Art Series* reminded her of one of her favorite quotes from Rumi, the Persian poet, that goes: **“I will soothe you and heal you, I will bring you roses. I too have been covered with thorns.”** As a cancer survivor herself, she understands what it is like to go through a cancer diagnosis, as well as what it feels like to have it return. Though Dr. Virk has been cancer-free for five years now, she hopes that by sharing her cancer story and the modalities that helped her heal, it will bring others who are going through a cancer diagnosis a sense of hope or comfort.



Her phenomenal ceramic pieces are currently on exhibit in the Jennifer Diamond Library located on the ground floor in room G501 at USC Norris from 10 AM to 3 PM, Monday through Friday. Her ceramic pieces are for sale, and the proceeds will benefit the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. Come check them out!

Why Your Gift Matters



Rick and Arlene Freeman

“My wife Arlene and I are both big believers in cancer research because our family, like many, has been touched by cancer,” said Rick Freeman, a philanthropist and retired businessman. **“We want our donations to help make progress in all types of cancer research, ultimately finding a cure.”**

Before retiring two years ago, Rick Freeman worked in the beauty business for 26 years, owning four retail beauty stores. Previous to that, he was a beauty broker, and a partner in Freeman Cosmetic Corporation. Rick and his wife Arlene were first introduced to USC Norris through his brother Larry Freeman. Since 1985, Rick and Arlene, as well as other members of the Freeman family, have generously supported a variety of cancer research and programs here at USC Norris.

Cancer has now impacted additional members of Rick’s family with his wife receiving a breast cancer diagnosis in recent years. Arlene came to USC Norris and the cancer was caught early and treated accordingly. She is thankfully now cancer free. Moreover, his daughter received a diagnosis of chronic lymphocytic leukemia a year and a half ago and she continues her battle. Though Rick and Arlene support all types of cancer research, they have redirected their more recent gifts to support research in Lymphoma as a result.

“USC Norris opened their doors to us and did an outstanding job taking care of my loved ones,” said Rick. **“We are thankful for Norris, the research they do, and the people who work there. Arlene and I are dedicated to making the world a better place to the best of our ability. We want to leave the world a better place and we hope our donations and support will advance cancer research forward and help cancer patients for years to come.”**

Upcoming Events

Grand Rounds: Heterogeneity of Cancer-Derived Extracellular Vesicles

December 6, 2022, 12-1 pm

Speaker: Dolores Di Vizio, MD, PhD

Zoom Link: <https://usc.zoom.us/j/95951223030>

For more information, click [HERE](#).

Grand Rounds: Malignant Transformation of the Immune System

December 13, 2022, 12-1 pm

Speaker: Elizabeth Jaffee, MD, FAACR, FACP

Zoom Link: <https://usc.zoom.us/j/95951223030>

For more information, click [HERE](#).



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Contact Us

Have something to contribute to Community for a Cure? Send it to Hinde.Kast@med.usc.edu

To learn more about giving to USC Norris, please contact Minhaal M. Nathani, Executive Director of Development, at Minhaal.Nathani@med.usc.edu

Learn more about the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center on our website:

<https://uscnorriscancer.usc.edu>