

SORF 2024 ANNUAL NEWSLETTER



THE USC/CHLA SUMMER ONCOLOGY RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP (SORF) PROGRAM – HEAR THE LATEST NEWS AND WAYS TO STAY INVOLVED

WORDS FROM DR. EPSTEIN

Welcome again to our SORF Annual (semi-annual?) Newsletter! The goal of this newsletter is to bolster connections among past SORFites and help build the SORF network. Many thanks to Elexa Rallos (SORF 2024) for creating the newsletter!

SORF's goal is to support medical students who have a passion for scientific research in their quest to become physician-scientists in oncology and related fields. Our USC/CHLA Summer Oncology Research Fellowship (**SORF**) Program has been continually active for almost 50 years since it was founded in the late 1970's. Since 2001 (when SORF began to have electronic records), 418 SORFites have completed the program.



The SORF Program, led by myself and Dr. Martin Kast, is recipient of a prestigious R25 award from the National Cancer Institute. Important support also comes from philanthropic donors such as the Concern Foundation, TriDelta, and Curing Kids Cancer, that together with institutional support and the NIH support, make SORF possible.

During the COVID pandemic in 2020, by turning to a fully-remote format, SORF was one of only a handful of summer research programs that remained active. 2021 was a hybrid, and finally, in 2022 SORF returned to a fully 'on site' program. This allowed the poster session, Pizza in the Park, participation in the Concern Block Party, Picnic @ Pickwick, in-person educational sessions, and many other activities.

SORF recruited many new mentors and new areas of research were added including bioinformatics, computational biology, and topics in preventive medicine, in addition to offerings in cutting edge laboratory and clinical research. Summers were very busy and students worked hard and well. Two students (2022, 2023), inspired by their SORF summer, joined MSTP PhD programs to become MD/PhD physician-scientists, and a number of other SORFites took research gap years at the NIH and other places, forwarding the SORF goal even further.

SORF is committed to its students' success. As I have said before: please put an annual reminder on your calendar to write to us a few sentences about your whereabouts and how you are doing, including your career progression, conference presentations, publications, grants you are contributing to, awards you have received, and also personal milestones such as family, sports, etc. We (and I personally!) want to know about you.

Please also contribute to this newsletter by sending us musings, ideas and other updates; highlights will be included in the newsletter, and if you permit, can be added to the SORF website.

Have a great year with lots of success and keep in touch!
Anat Epstein

MANY THANKS TO OUR GENEROUS 2024 DONORS AND SUPPORTERS:

- Concern Foundation for Cancer Research and:
 - The Hirsch Family Foundation
 - Debbie and Rick Powell
 - Jackie Gottlieb
 - Lisi and Steve Teller
 - Julie and Brad Shames
- Curing Kids Cancer
- Tri Delta
- The Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, Keck Medicine of USC
- Department of Pediatrics, Children's Hospital Los Angeles
- National Cancer Institute, Cancer Research Education grant R25 CA225513

Special guests who shared their knowledge and experience with the SORFites:

- Derek Alpert, Concern Foundation for Cancer Research
- Jeri Wilson, Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation
- Cancer Survivors Mary Aalto, Hector Ibarra, and Gaspar Melikyan

2024 SORFITES



SORF 2024

In summer 2024, SORF welcomed 20 medical students from across the country. Student research involved a broad range of topics, from zebrafish models of Ewing sarcoma, through effects of virtual reality on pain management, to assessing AI models in cancer detection.

See more on SORF 2024 in the pages below.

Reminder: 2025 SORF summer application is now live (see announcements below); we encourage alumni to invite research-inclined medical students to apply!

MEET OUR 2024 SORFITES

Courtney Abbriano

New York Medical College

Hayley Baker

Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine at UNLV

Kaitlyn Bali

Chicago Medical School at Rosalind Franklin University

Fox Bravo

University of Arizona
College of Medicine Tucson

Sydney Brown

Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science College of Medicine

Flora Dievenich Braes

University of Connecticut School of Medicine

Nabih Ghani

Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine at UNLV

Hannah Herring

University of New Mexico School of Medicine

Zoe Lung

University of Louisville School of Medicine

Matthew Mueller

University of Nebraska Medical Center

Johnny Odeh

Paul L. Foster School of Medicine
(Texas Tech El Paso)

Gloria Pan

Carle Illinois College of Medicine

Donna Pham

UC Riverside School of Medicine

Elexa Rallos

Eastern Virginia Medical School

Jennifer Ritchie

Indiana University School of Medicine

Jesus Rosario-Rivera

University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine

Tara Tekkey

University of Toledo College of Medicine and Life Sciences

Colby Watase

University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine

Hannah Wolfson

California Northstate University College of Medicine

Colin Yeo

Keck School of Medicine of USC



ANNOUNCEMENTS

[Please fill out our brief alumni survey](#)

SORF is ramping up efforts to facilitate networking among alumni. We would love to hear what SORF alumni have accomplished since their time in the program.

[Join our new alumni GroupMe](#)

We have created a new platform, starting with GroupMe, for previous SORFites to connect with one another. This is an opportunity to share work, ask questions about careers, and for networking between previous SORF participants. In the future, we hope to explore other platforms and ways to encourage mentorship/networking between the SORF cohorts.

[Send us your updates](#)

We always want to hear from you; if you have updates in terms of research, residency, or beyond in your career, feel free to send your updates to SORF@chla.usc.edu.

[2025 SORF Applications](#)

2025 SORF applications are now open [on our website](#). If you know a qualified candidate, encourage them to apply.



PICNIC @ PICKWICK

**SUMMER KICKOFF - PICNIC @ PICKWICK
DINNER AT DR. EPSTEIN'S HOME**

SORF again kicked off the summer with a dinner at Dr. Epstein's beautiful home. This was the first of many summer events for the SORFites. This year, the SORFites gelled together exceptionally well, and in addition to the rich formal program, also enjoyed LA hikes together, beach days, a CHLA-based triathlon with Dr. Epstein (inquire for summer 2025!), a trip to Joshua Tree National Park, and Jeni's Ice Cream. SORFites all really enjoyed their time in Los Angeles and loved sharing these fun activities with their fellow SORFites!



CONCERN ANNUAL BLOCK PARTY

**ANNUAL CONCERN
FOUNDATION BLOCK PARTY**

SORFites had a blast at the 49th Annual Concern Foundation Block Party on the Paramount Studios Hollywood lot. This amazing event had over 4,000 guests and raised more than \$2.4 million for cancer research. SORFites enjoyed a night of special guests, spectacular performances, and incredible food and drinks from Los Angeles' most popular restaurants.

Thank you Concern Foundation for the complimentary invitations and the educational opportunity; we appreciate all of your support for SORF!



SORF POSTER DAY

**2024 SORF POSTER
DAY AT CHLA**

As the summer came to a close, SORFites presented their work in two formats: the first was a SORF poster session, where SORFites showcased their hard work in beautifully-done posters and discussed their work with faculty, guests, and students who attended the event.

**CANCER SURVIVORS SHARE
EXPERIENCES WITH SORFITES**

Hector Ibarra playing for the SORFites original music that he composed on the kantele (Finnish stringed instrument that resembles a harpsichord). Hector, in his 30's, was treated for retinoblastoma at CHLA and has been blind since age 10. He is now a musician and music teacher. He and Gaspar are both survivors of childhood cancer. Hector, Mary Aalto and Gaspar Melikyan, kindly shared their experiences with the group.



HECTOR IBARRA

The second was a series of three oral sessions, each with about 100 CHLA & USC participants, where each of the 20 SORFites gave a 5-minute rapid-fire presentation followed by Q&A. These were a resounding success and garnered many compliments to the high quality of the work, the professional presentations, and the excellent and thoughtful answers SORFites gave to the questions.

LATEST SORFITE PRESENTATIONS & PUBLICATIONS

2024 PUBLICATIONS (PARTIAL LIST)

- **Westerman CR**, Davidson TB, Waters K, Margol AS, Cheung CC. Immune checkpoint inhibitors and endocrinopathy in pediatric brain tumor patients. *J Pediatr Endocrinol Metab*, 2024. PMID: accepted, pending publication.
- **Sandoval ZE**, Schmidt RJ, Bhutada JS, Shillingford N, Zhou S. A Novel TEK::GAB2 Gene Fusion in Pediatric Angiosarcoma of Pelvic soft Tissue: A Case Report and Literature Review. *Pediatr Dev Pathol*, 2024. PMID: [39248342](#).
- **Hultquist H, Rodriguez A**, Ferreira JE, Placek A, Miller KP, Wood BL, Bhojwani D, Kapoor N, Raca G, Gaynon P, Kovach AE. Development of second genetically distinct T-lymphoblastic leukemia in a pediatric patient. *Pediatr Blood Cancer*, 2024. PMID: [38736199](#).
- **Kumar SS**, Khandekar N, Dani K, Bhatt S, Duddalwar V, Dsouza A. A scoping review of population diversity in the common genomic aberrations of clear cell renal cell carcinoma. *Oncology*, 2024. PMID: [39250899](#).
- **Kovach AE, Wengyn M**, Vu MH, Doan A, Raca G, Bhojwani D. IKZF1(PLUS) alterations contribute to outcome disparities in Hispanic/Latino children with B-lymphoblastic leukemia. *Pediatr Blood Cancer*, 2024. PMID: [38637852](#).

* **Bold:** SORFite; Underlined: Mentor(s)

2024 PRESENTATIONS (PARTIAL LIST)

- **Tran E**, ... Nieva J. Quantified kinematics and wearable sensors to predict serious adverse events in patients undergoing cancer therapy trials. In: AACR; 2024.
- **Rodriguez A**, ... Kovach A. Flow cytometry is a reproducible adjunct to cytomorphology of cerebrospinal fluid for acute leukemia. In: American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology (ASPHO); 2024.
- **Kam L**, Peng C-C, Berry J, Xu L. Multiplexed bead-based extracellular vesicle profiling of aqueous humor from uveal melanoma eyes. In: Southern Regional Meeting; 2024
- **Wang J**, ... Ye JC. Postoperative radiotherapy for malignant cord compression treated in a public and private hospital. In: ASTRO; 2024.
- **Pastard W**, ... Tsui J. Stool-based colorectal cancer screening during the COVID-19 pandemic in a safety-net setting: a mixed-methods study. In: The Science of Cancer Health Disparities, AACR; 2024.
- **Zhang A**, Matsuo K, Roman L. Clinical characteristics of patients with cervical cancer undergoing fertilitysparing surgery with cervical excision and lymph node evaluation. In: Western Association of Gynecologic Oncology; 2024.
- **Okabe A**, Ho WL, Tao ML, JC. Y. Cosmetic outcomes following whole breast or partial breast irradiation for breast cancer: a single institution experience. In: ASTRO, 2024

[SEE A FULL LIST OF PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS HERE](#)

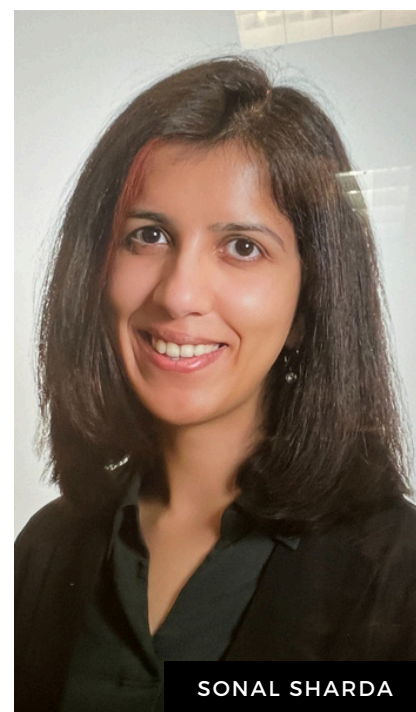
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Name: Sonal Sharda

SORF Class of 2021

Current Status: MS4 at UMass Chan School of Medicine

The SORF program was an invaluable experience that allowed me to witness firsthand how research innovation drives meaningful advancements in healthcare. It was a privilege to learn from leaders in their fields who shared insights into their career paths and broadened my understanding of how to approach scientific inquiry from diverse perspectives. Under the guidance of Dr. Benita Tamrazi, I examined the post-treatment effects of cranial radiation therapy on cancer patients across the lifespan. As part of this, I had the opportunity to not only collaborate with peers across the country but also explore the community of Los Angeles for the first time! My time in the SORF program solidified my commitment to becoming a physician-scientist and inspired me to pursue a research year at the NIH through the Medical Research Scholars Program (NIH MRSP), an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in basic, clinical, translational, or epidemiology research. There, I continued to build upon my research foundation, deepening my focus on improving health outcomes for underserved communities. I am grateful for my experience in SORF for shaping my research journey. I look forward to working with colleagues and mentors to further tackle healthcare challenges.



SONAL SHARDA

THANKS TO FACULTY MENTORS AND SPEAKERS FOR THEIR TIME THIS SUMMER



DEDICATED MENTORS, WHO TOOK A SORFITE UNDER THEIR WINGS TO GUIDE THEIR RESEARCH PROJECT:

- Amatruda, James, MD
- Asgharzadeh, Shahab, MD
- Attenello, Frank, MD
- Chiarelli, Peter, MD, DPhil
- Chow, Frances, MD
- Duddalwar, Vinay, MD
- Erdreich-Epstein, Anat, MD, PhD
- Gaynon, Paul, MD
- Goldkorn, Amir, MD
- Graham, Nicholas, PhD
- Hu, Jenny, MD, MPH
- Kovach, Alexandra, MD
- Lu, Rong, PhD
- Nieva, Jorge, MD
- Offringa, Ite, PhD
- Pinski, Jasek, MD, PhD
- Roussos Torres, Evanthia, MD, PhD
- Sheth-Bhutada, Jessica MD
- Tran, David, MD, PhD
- Wong, Kenneth, MD

FACULTY AND TRAINEE SPEAKERS, WHO VOLUNTEERED THEIR TIME TO PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND CONTENT AND/OR TO SUPPORT THE STUDENTS' CAREER

DEVELOPMENT:

- Amatruda, James, MD, PhD
- Asgharzadeh, Shahab, MD
- Attenello, Frank, MD
- Biegel, Jaclyn, PhD
- Cockburn, Myles, PhD
- Cox, Lewellyn, PhD
- De Clerck, Yves, MD
- Erdreich-Epstein, Anat, MD, PhD
- Gaynon, Paul, MD
- Haladyna, Jessica, MD
- Kast, Martin, PhD
- Derrington, Sabrina, MD
- Durazo-Arvizu, Ramon, PhD
- Goldkorn, Amir, MD
- Jizzini, Mazen, MD
- Kim, Eugene, MD
- Kingsley, Jenny, MD
- Lin, Carol, PhD
- Nieva, Jorge, MD
- O'Halloran, Katrina, MD
- Patino-Sutton, Cecilia, MD, PhD
- Sheth-Bhutada, Jessica, MD
- Xu, Liya, PhD
- Ye, Jason, MD
- **Special thanks to the Donnell Society Scholars**



FINALLY, A VERY SPECIAL THANKS
TO DAIKOTA BARNETT FOR A
FANTASTIC JOB COORDINATING
THE PROGRAM THIS SUMMER!