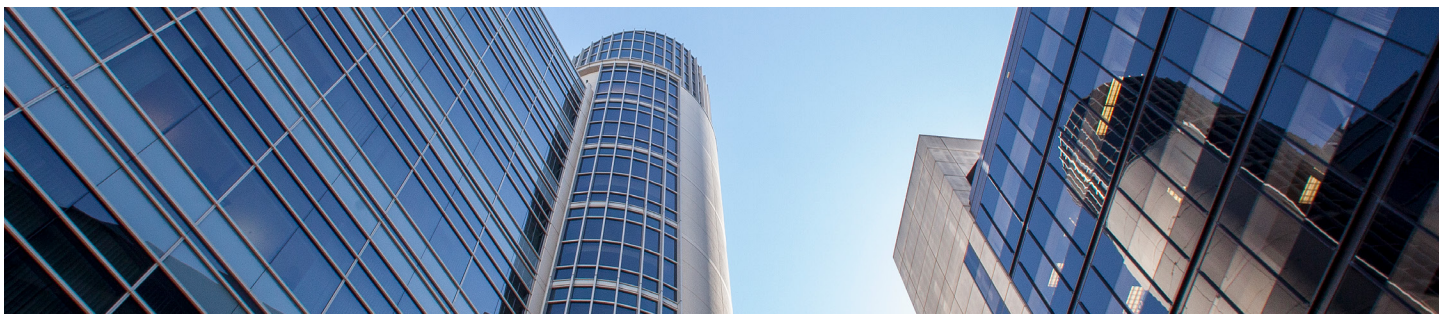


# COMMUNITY

## for a CURE



### *35th Annual Festival of Life*



The sounds of the USC Trojan Marching Band marked the beginning of the 35th Festival of Life with the sharp crack of snare drums, the deep boom of bass drums, and the bright blare of trumpets cutting through the air, the sound echoing throughout all of Pappas Quad at the Health Sciences Campus. The event, held on the beautiful morning of Saturday, June 7th, celebrated the strength, resilience, and tenacity of cancer survivors and their families. The event included an array of exhibitors offering resources for cancer survivors, as well as interactive stations where attendees could write messages of encouragement, gratitude, or tribute to those impacted by cancer. Guests also enjoyed food trucks and a meaningful program that included inspiring speeches and a heartfelt patient testimonial.



W. Martin Kast, PhD, co-leader of the USC Norris Tumor Microenvironment Program and a professor of molecular microbiology and immunology, obstetrics and gynecology, and urology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, served as master of ceremonies. The event included opening remarks by Annette Sy, Chief Nursing Executive; a special address by Syma Iqbal, a medical oncologist and clinical researcher at USC Norris and Keck Medicine of USC; and an invocation by Chaplain Symeon Yee.

**“This event is about you, our survivors, and the people who have stood beside you: your families, your friends, your caregivers, and every individual who has played a role in your healing journey,”** said Sy. **“Each of you has faced one of life’s greatest challenges and emerged stronger. Your stories inspire us. They remind us that survivorship is not only about enduring, but about rebuilding, thriving, and continuing to live with purpose.”**

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One of the most powerful moments of the program came when Brendan Cho took the stage.

**“To everyone here, whether you’re surviving, grieving, or walking alongside someone in this fight, I see you,” said Cho. “I stand with you. And I hope by sharing my story, I can remind you that even when life knocks us down, we still have the strength to rise, to live fully, and to keep going.”**



*Photo Credit: Don Milici*



*Photo Credit: Don Milici*

Led by Judy Stark, a twenty-four-year cancer survivor and volunteer at the cancer center and cancer hospital, cancer survivors were invited to wave lavender ribbon wands high in the air, a color symbolizing unity and inclusivity, amid applause during the event as a show of celebration and support. As the crowd lifted their ribbon wands into the air, a wave of purple swept through the audience, hundreds of ribbons dancing in the breeze, a symbolic gesture of hope, support, and community.

Survivors ranging from twenty years or more to those who are just beginning their survivorship were honored and received a roaring round of applause from all in attendance. Additionally, everyone in attendance at the Festival of Life applauded the patients currently undergoing treatment at USC Norris Cancer Hospital in a heartwarming, inspiring display of community and support.

**“We celebrate a community bound by strength, hope, and the memories of those who fought bravely but are no longer with us,” said Kast. “We honor those who have lost their battle, and those who continue the fight every day. This year, in particular, we honor the loss of our dear friend John Aalto, who recently lost his battle with cancer, but who will always be remembered and dearly missed. We also honor our physicians, nurses, researchers, and caregivers who remain committed to advancing cutting-edge treatment, groundbreaking research, and providing compassionate care.”**

### *3rd Annual Cancer Research Day*



On May 22, 2025, USC Norris hosted their 3rd annual Cancer Research Day, an event showcasing the transformative and groundbreaking cancer research being conducted by our exceptional scientists, researchers, physicians, and learners to our USC scientific and patient community.

The morning sessions started with an overview presentation from Dr. Josh Neman regarding the USC Norris Cancer Research Training and Education Coordination Program. This presentation was followed by a series of presentations focused on the team-science based work being conducted at the cancer center by our extraordinary scientists and physicians. A panel session also took place, featuring scientists who have led or contributed to team science grants. Panelists shared valuable insights and answered audience questions about the challenges and successes of collaborative



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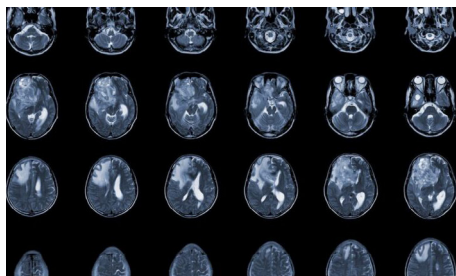
research. These sessions showcased how collaboration across disciplines, by bringing together scientists, clinicians, and community partners, can lead to innovative and impactful discoveries.



The afternoon included an interactive poster session, which provided an opportunity for faculty, post docs, and graduate students to present on all of the exciting laboratory and clinical science that is ongoing at the Cancer Center. Posters showcasing the latest advancements in cancer research and care at USC Norris filled Pappas Quad at the Health Sciences Campus. The afternoon session ended with awards given to the three best posters, decided upon by a panel of judges. The three recipients of the Scientific Award were Binu Jacob, for his poster titled “Young Adults’ Vaping Cessation Discourse on TikTok;” Reid Whaley, for her poster titled “Interactions of processed meat and red meat intake with pathway-based polygenic risk scores for colorectal cancer: A novel approach for PRSs construction;” and Thomas Tilton, for his poster titled “Single-Cell Analyses Reveal Metabolic Heterogeneity Between HPV+ and HPV- Head and Neck Cancer Tumor Microenvironments.”

This event was a powerful reminder that when we work together, we amplify our impact and move closer to breakthroughs that can truly change lives.

## Scientific Advances and Discoveries



### New compound targets circadian clock machinery in cells to fight glioblastoma

Glioblastoma is the most common cancerous brain tumor in adults—and one of the most difficult to treat. Most patients receive a combination of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, but tumors typically return and resist further treatment. Published in the journal *Neuro-Oncology*, USC Norris member Dr. Steve Kay and his team demonstrated that a new drug compound, SHP1705, targets circadian clock proteins hijacked by glioblastoma stem cells, impairing the cancer cells’ ability to survive and grow, with minimal impact on healthy cells. When they treated glioblastoma stem cells with other drug compounds developed to target clock proteins, none worked as well as SHP1705. SHP1705 is also the first clock-targeting compound to complete a phase 1 clinical trial, where they tested SHP1705’s ability to neutralize glioblastoma stem cells, finding it to be highly effective, safe, and well-tolerated in humans. Learn more here: <https://keck.usc.edu/news/new-compound-targets-circadian-clock-machinery-in-cells-to-fight-glioblastoma/>.

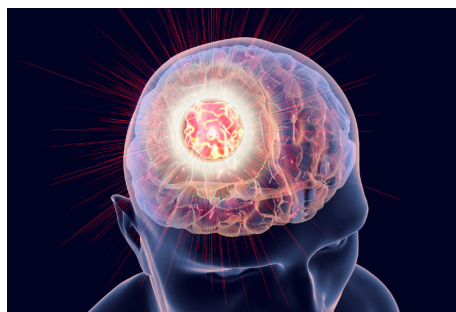
“We have mounting evidence that clock proteins can be co-opted by brain cancer stem cells to fuel their growth,” said Kay. “If we can successfully target the circadian clock, these cells lose their ability to replicate.”



Congratulations to USC Norris members Drs. Vaia Lida Chatzi, Max Aung, Rob McConnell, David Conti, and Jesse Goodrich who have been awarded an \$8 million, five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health to launch a Superfund Research Program Center where they will study environmental contamination from “forever chemicals,” or PFAS, which are used to make multiple household items from cookware to furniture, and are estimated to be present in the blood of more than 99% of U.S. adults. Moreover, our researchers have found that these chemicals can affect nearly every organ in the body, including the kidneys and liver, and are linked to

a range of rare cancers. Learn more about the center here: <https://keck.usc.edu/news/nih-to-award-8-million-for-new-usc-superfund-center-to-research-and-address-forever-chemicals/>.





## New clinical trial results demonstrate that electric fields may supercharge immune attack on the deadliest form of brain cancer

Glioblastoma (GBM) is the most common and deadliest brain cancer in adults, with limited success from current treatments. In a *new clinical trial*, led by USC Norris member and Co-Director of the USC Brain Tumor Center Dr. David Tran, researchers tested whether combining two therapies—Tumor Treating Fields (also known as Optune) and Keytruda (an immunotherapy)—could improve survival for newly diagnosed GBM patients. 31 patients who had finished standard treatment, which included surgery or biopsy, followed by radiation and chemotherapy, received the Optune–Keytruda–chemotherapy combination. The results were promising and patients on the combination lived longer without disease progression and had better overall survival. The study also showed that the combination helped the immune system recognize and remember the tumor, potentially offering lasting protection. By combining Optune with immunotherapy, we’ve shown it’s possible to reawaken the immune system against glioblastoma, offering new hope for patients with the most aggressive and previously unresponsive brain tumors. Learn more about this trial here: <https://news.keckmedicine.org/could-electric-fields-supercharge-immune-attack-on-the-deadliest-form-of-brain-cancer/>.

**“By using TTFields with immunotherapy, we prime the body to mount an attack on the cancer, which enables the immunotherapy to have a meaningful effect in ways that it could not before,” said Tran. “Our findings suggest that TTFields may be the key to unlocking the value of immunotherapy in treating glioblastoma.”**

## Awards/Recognitions



Congratulations to Dr. Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati, the Associate Director for Community Outreach and Engagement at USC Norris, who was recently appointed the Senior Associate Dean for Community and Workforce Development Initiatives for the Keck School of Medicine of USC, effective May 1, 2025. A USC Distinguished Professor of Population and Public Health Sciences, Dr. Baezconde-Garbanati has been a driving force in community outreach and engagement. In her new role, Dr. Baezconde-Garbanati will further enhance community partnerships, expand collaborations with the business community, local schools and colleges, and federally qualified health centers to support efforts that address socioeconomic, environmental, and health disparities, and contribute to community economic empowerment and workforce readiness.



Congratulations to Dr. Gary Ulaner, member of the USC Norris Translational and Clinical Sciences Program, who has been elected vice president-elect of the Society of Nuclear Medicine and Molecular Imaging (SNMMI). In his role as vice president-elect, Dr. Ulaner is committed to supporting nuclear medicine research, expanding educational activities for nuclear medicine professionals, and driving growth and funding for training new radiochemistry and physics professionals.

**“It is an honor to serve SNMMI and the nuclear medicine community at this pivotal time,” said Ulaner. “The potential of nuclear medicine to transform the care of patients with cancer and other diseases is enormous, and we must continue to build the infrastructure, education, and support necessary to realize that promise.”**



Each year, Los Angeles Magazine publishes a comprehensive list of recommended doctors in a variety of specialties. **A major shoutout to our USC Norris members and incredible physicians, Drs. Hossein Jadvar, Vinay Duddalwar, and Peter Conti for being named Top Doctors for 2025 by Los Angeles Magazine.** Your dedication, compassion, and excellence continue to inspire us every day. We're proud to celebrate this well-deserved recognition.

## ***MICEO Billboard Launch***



Now in its 7th year, billboards of our multimedia and multicultural Es Tiempo campaign are scattered throughout LA to encourage screening for HPV related cancers. Working with residents as well, the USC Norris Community Outreach and Engagement team developed a campaign that associates regular Pap smears with the yearly springtime purple bloom of the jacaranda trees in local LA neighborhoods. Every year, the jacaranda tree, beautiful, beloved, and bursting with purple blooms, serves as a reminder in our community that it's time for those with a cervix to screen for cervical cancer through a Pap smear or HPV DNA test, and to get vaccinated against HPV. The vaccine is available through your medical provider for individuals ages 9 to 45, offering protection against 16 different strains of the virus and helping prevent cervical and other HPV-related cancers.



## FOLLOW US ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS!

To learn about the latest discoveries and news from USC Norris, please follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. To connect with us, open your phone's camera app, face it towards the QR code, click on the link that appears, and click the "Follow" button located at the top.



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## Contact Us

Have something to contribute to Community for a Cure? Send it to [Hinde.Kast@med.usc.edu](mailto:Hinde.Kast@med.usc.edu)

To learn more about giving to USC Norris, please contact Minhaal M. Nathani, Senior Executive Director of Development, at [Minhaal.Nathani@med.usc.edu](mailto:Minhaal.Nathani@med.usc.edu)

Learn more about the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center on our website:  
<https://uscnorriscancer.usc.edu>