



For Immediate Release

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**The V Foundation Announces New Category of V Scholar Grant for Black/African American Researchers**  
Bristol Myers Squibb's \$1M Donation to Stuart Scott Memorial Cancer Research Fund Supports Five Awards



(Photo from left to right: Verline Justilien, Ph.D.; Catherine Marshall, M.D.; Jasmine McDonald, Ph.D.; Sorbarikor Piawah, M.D.; Avery Posey, Jr., Ph.D.; Melody Smith, M.D.; Marcia Tan, Ph.D.; Stefani Thomas, Ph.D.)

**Cary, NC [April 19, 2021]** -- The V Foundation for Cancer Research, a top-rated cancer research charity, has announced the selection of eight researchers to receive V Scholar Grants funded by the Stuart Scott Memorial Cancer Research Fund. This grant opportunity is specifically for researchers from the Black/African American community, a minority group that is underrepresented in scientific research. Longtime V Foundation supporter, Bristol Myers Squibb, contributed \$1 million to support this initiative, fully funding five of the eight grants.

"These eight new V Scholars are an impressive group of brilliant researchers and represent a move toward equity," said **Sage Steele**, V Foundation board member, ESPN personality and longtime colleague and friend of Stuart Scott. "I am proud to see the V Foundation recognize the need for more African Americans in cancer research, and I know Stuart would be as well."

The V Foundation and founding partner ESPN have had a long-standing commitment to health equity and established the Stuart Scott Fund in memory of beloved ESPN sportscaster Stuart Scott after he passed away from cancer in 2015. Stuart was a champion for cancer research and was especially driven to improve outcomes for African Americans and other minorities disproportionately affected by the disease. With ESPN's help, the fund has awarded \$12.7 million in grants.

"Diversifying the researcher workforce is critical to advancing biomedical science, but funding for their research is also essential. According to the National Institutes of Health, African American researchers today are underfunded compared to their white counterparts, which can have a myriad of impacts, including researchers' access to more senior faculty and leadership positions," said Adam Lenkowsky, senior vice president and general manager, U.S. Cardiovascular, Immunology and Oncology, Bristol Myers Squibb. "As part of our commitment to diversity and inclusion, we're proud to extend our long-standing support of the V Foundation in its work to support and propel forward African American scientists, and this class of V Scholars in particular, who are leading important cancer research and progressing the field."

The V Scholar Grant supports early tenure-track faculty by funding a range of projects, including laboratory-based and bench-to-bedside research. Each grant is a two-year award totaling \$200,000.

The grant recipients and their research focuses include:

- **Verline Justilien, Ph.D.**, from [Mayo Clinic in Florida](#). Justilien is focusing on how persistent cancer stem cells can be inhibited or eliminated to prevent the recurrence and spread of non-small cell lung cancer.

- **Catherine Marshall, M.D.**, from [Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins](#). Marshall is studying how abnormal DNA mutations in blood cells (clonal hematopoiesis) may contribute to worse outcomes in men with advanced prostate cancer.
- **Jasmine McDonald, Ph.D.**, from [Columbia University](#). McDonald is working to understand the biology of pregnancy-associated breast cancer, which includes identifying biomarkers that can predict this cancer at an early stage.
- **Sorbarikor Piawah, M.D.**, from [University of California in San Francisco](#). Piawah is focusing on exploring the role of diet, lifestyle and the gut microbiome in young onset colorectal cancer.
- **Avery Posey, Jr., Ph.D.**, from [University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine](#). Posey's research is on novel immunotherapies (CAR-T and CAR-NK cell therapy) for multiple myeloma.
- **Melody Smith, M.D.**, from [Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center](#). Smith wants to improve allogeneic hematopoietic cell transplants to decrease cancer relapse without side effects such as graft vs. host disease (GVHD) or graft rejection.
- **Marcia Tan, Ph.D.**, from [The University of Chicago Medicine Comprehensive Cancer Center](#). Tan is addressing tobacco use in adults outside of primary care and developing a tobacco cessation curriculum for community health workers.
- **Stefani Thomas, Ph.D.**, from [Masonic Cancer Center](#). Thomas wants to identify and understand the proteins that are involved in responding to a group of drugs named PARP inhibitors, commonly used to treat ovarian cancer, which will help target this treatment to patients who will benefit.

The V Foundation has a Scientific Advisory Committee to review grant applications, oversee ad hoc review panels and recommend awards. The Committee is comprised of some of the nation's leading physicians and research scientists from prominent universities and cancer centers. They ensure proposals meet the highest standards of scientific merit and that funding is properly allocated to grant recipients.

The V Foundation holds 10 consecutive 4-star (highest) ratings from Charity Navigator, America's largest evaluator of charities, making the Foundation among the top 2% of all charities evaluated. The V Foundation is also a GuideStar Platinum-rated charity.

For more information about the V Foundation, V Scholar Grants, the Stuart Scott Fund or to donate, please visit [v.org](http://v.org).

#### **About the V Foundation for Cancer Research**

The V Foundation for Cancer Research was founded in 1993 by ESPN and the late Jim Valvano, legendary North Carolina State University basketball coach and ESPN commentator. The V Foundation has funded more than \$260 million in game-changing cancer research grants nationwide through a competitive process strictly supervised by a world-class Scientific Advisory Committee. Because the V Foundation has an endowment to cover administrative expenses, 100% of direct donations is awarded to cancer research and programs. The V team is committed to accelerating Victory Over Cancer®. To learn more, visit [v.org](http://v.org).

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