



CEDARS-SINAI MEDICAL CENTER®

NEWS

8700 Beverly Blvd., Room 2429A ■ Los Angeles, CA 90048-1865
Office (310) 423-4767 ■ Fax (310) 423-0435

Media Contact: Sandra Van
Telephone: 1-800-880-2397
E-mail: sandy@vancommunications.com

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HIGHLIGHTS:

The first two recipients of the Pauletta and Denzel Washington Family Gifted Scholars Program in Neuroscience have started their work at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. A 26-year-old from Oakland, who recently earned his medical degree, is conducting research on the immune system. An 18-year-old recent high school graduate from Fort Worth, Texas, is investigating the blood-brain barrier. Both arrived with outstanding abilities, talents and motivation.

WASHINGTON FAMILY SCHOLARS ARRIVE WITH IMPRESSIVE CREDENTIALS AND EYES TO THE FUTURE

LOS ANGELES (July 19, 2004) – Coming from dissimilar backgrounds and geographic locations, but sharing a common interest in neuroscience, the first two recipients of annual research awards named in honor of Pauletta and Denzel Washington have become immersed in projects at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Lawrence Daniels, 26, originally from Oakland, will devote his fellowship year to developing “super” dendritic cells to make the immune system more effective in killing brain tumor cells. Kathleen Kelly, 18, from Fort Worth, Texas, is participating in a summer scholarship program in which she is working to further open the blood-brain barrier to therapeutic drugs.

The recipients of the Pauletta and Denzel Washington Family Gifted Scholars Program in Neuroscience were named during an April 14 ceremony at Cedars-Sinai. The undergraduate award provides \$2,000 per month in support while the graduate-level award affords \$2,500 per month. Each recipient has the opportunity to conduct research under the supervision of world-renowned scientists and will submit an abstract or scientific paper to a national neuroscience, cancer or neurosurgery organization.

Although the availability of the scholarships was announced only a short time before they were awarded, Keith L. Black, MD, director of the medical center’s Division of Neurosurgery, said the response was impressive. “We had a pool of exceptional applicants even with only about two months’ notice. They were just absolutely outstanding.”

Lawrence Daniels received his medical degree from the University of California, Los Angeles on June 4, 2004 after earning undergraduate degrees in psychology and business administration at the University of Southern California. While working on his undergraduate degrees, he also completed his pre-med courses. In applying for the fellowship, he received excellent references from professors of neurosurgery at UCLA and Louisiana State University, where he completed an elective rotation in 2003.

He also had established a good reputation among the neuroscientists at Cedars-Sinai during an eight-week

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National Medical Fellowship in 2002 at the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute. During that fellowship, Dr. Daniels, with the mentoring of Dr. Black, John Yu, MD, and Yasuharu Akasaki, PhD, worked on one of several projects intended to fine-tune the dendritic cell vaccine developed at Cedars-Sinai.

The goal was to make immature dendritic cells – those responsible for identifying antigens and eliciting an immune response – more potent than naturally occurring dendritic cells. Inserting into a modified virus a gene that causes cell death in certain types of tumor cells, the researchers infected the immature dendritic cells. When these “infected” cells were placed in a dish with tumor cells, 20 percent more brain tumor cells died.

“I’m attempting to start right where I left off,” says Dr. Daniels, who enjoys sports, hiking and music in his rare free time. He says his mentors provided invaluable guidance in both research and neurosurgery.

“I think those are the things that most people can’t appreciate – that you have an individual who has gone through it and learned at that capacity, and they sit down and say, ‘This is how you should approach it. These are the things you should do between every case.’ They put the pieces together for you and you begin doing it and you can see – you just acquire the knowledge. It’s amazing.”

Since childhood, Dr. Daniels has exhibited the intelligence and motivation to take advantage of opportunities that came his way – and to make opportunities happen. Raised in West Oakland, in what he describes as a “not-so-good area,” Daniels performed well enough on test scores to rank among the top students and qualify for entry into a program called ABC, A Better Chance, sponsored by Oprah Winfrey. That experience led to a boarding school, the Athenian School in Danville, where he was introduced to “extreme academia.”

After four years of this highly disciplined education, he went on to USC for his undergraduate degrees and pre-med studies. When funding was not available for his research interests, he took the initiative to apply and receive it on his own, and when the study he was planning to conduct was put on hold, he took a strong role in developing a new one. His professional goal is to specialize in neurosurgery while continuing to conduct research.

“The ideal job for any neurosurgeon, I believe, is to not only be able to operate and take care of patients, but to also be able to do research and advance our knowledge,” he says.

Kathleen Kelly is not yet sure if she wants to become a surgeon or a research scientist but she has always had an interest in the neurosciences. The Texas native already has some research experience in a molecular biology lab. After her sophomore year of high school, she participated in the University of Florida’s Student Science Training Program and received the Top Research Paper honors. She was invited back the following summer as a paid employee of the lab.

Now she is working with Dr. Black, one of the most respected neurosurgeons who also is credited with making some of the most important discoveries in the body’s natural defense mechanism called the blood-brain barrier. This chemical-biological barrier is intended to prevent toxic substances from entering the brain through the bloodstream, but it also blocks cancer-killing agents. Through years of study, Dr. Black and his research teams have been able to improve chemotherapy delivery a thousand-fold, but the search for improvement continues.

Before Kathleen’s May 21 graduation from Fort Worth Country Day School, the school’s director of College Counseling sent a recommendation that she be considered for the Washington Family award.

“This young woman will graduate with THE (caps his) single most demanding course load of any student in recent history at our school and likely throughout all 41 years we have been in existence,” he said. His letter listed numerous honors and AP (advanced placement) courses, many taken a year ahead of schedule. She took

five AP classes in her junior year and five more in her senior year, for example. “There was only one more science class she could take so her schedule this year (her senior year) is heavy in the arts and humanities. To make up for that, she takes a Linear Algebra class at a local university (TCU) because we also have no more math classes for her to take. ... Never has a student so exhausted the most extensive college preparatory curriculum in the city.”

Kathleen also excels in the creative arts, was president of the Math & Science Team, served as senior class representative to the Student Council, and has volunteered during spring breaks with Habitat for Humanity. She also earned six varsity athletic letters – two in field hockey and four in track.

Although Kathleen has an extraordinary résumé for an 18-year-old, she also has an unpretentious demeanor and a quick wit. When teased that her recommendations sound too good to be true, she laughs and says, “They’re completely fabricated.” When asked what one thing she would enjoy doing if she had no other responsibilities for a day, she says, “I really enjoy ceramics and I really love playing field hockey.” Reminded that she has only one choice, she’s pragmatic: “It depends on how hot it was that day.”

In inaugurating the Washington Family awards, Dr. Black notes that the United States appears to be losing its leadership role in the sciences because “our best and brightest are not going into these fields in the same numbers that they were before. They’re going into investment banking and other areas for the financial reward. Unfortunately, this is at a time when we have our greatest opportunity to make tremendous advances in terms of treating cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, heart disease and other conditions. There has never been an opportunity like we have now to begin to translate our discoveries into treatments for patients.”

“One of the things that we think is very important is being able to train the next generation of life scientists for the future,” continues Dr Black, who serves as director of the Comprehensive Brain Tumor Program and the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute, and holds the Ruth and Lawrence Harvey Chair in Neuroscience. “We want to make sure that we provide the mentorship so that these extremely talented and bright individuals can have the best opportunity for success in their scientific careers. We want them to have the best direction early on so they can make the major breakthroughs in the next 10 to 15 years.”

Cedars-Sinai is one of the largest nonprofit academic medical centers in the Western United States. For the fifth straight two-year period, it has been named Southern California's gold standard in health care in an independent survey. Cedars-Sinai is internationally renowned for its diagnostic and treatment capabilities and its broad spectrum of programs and services, as well as breakthroughs in biomedical research and superlative medical education. It ranks among the top 10 non-university hospitals in the nation for its research activities.

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