Spudich Elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences

John L. Spudich, Ph.D., Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Director of the Center for Membrane Biology and Robert A. Welch Distinguished Chair has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He will be inducted into the Academy in a ceremony to be held October 6, 2007 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Fellow inductees at the same ceremony will include former US Vice-President and Presidential candidate Al Gore, Google Chairman and CEO Eric Schmidt, former Supreme Court Associate Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and New York mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Dr. Spudich is well-known for his research in the field of photosensory receptors. A recent publication “Early Photocycle Changes in a Bacteriorhodopsin Mutant Engineered to Transmit Photosensory Signals” was featured as the cover article in the May 25, 2007 issue of the Journal of Biological Chemistry.

Lee Wins NIH Pioneer Award

Cheng-Chi Lee, Ph.D., Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, was one of only 13 recipients nationwide to receive an NIH Pioneer Award. This prestigious $2.5 million 5-year award is designed to support exceptionally creative scientists who address major scientific questions using highly innovative approaches. Dr. Lee’s research involves mechanisms for inducing suspended animation and metabolic changes in non-hibernating mammals. This technology for lowering the body’s temperature promises to have widespread clinical application in treatment of many diseases and injuries.

Strobel Wins Major Teaching Award

Henry Strobel, Ph.D., Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs at the Medical School received the President’s Scholar Award for Teaching at the 2006 Faculty Honors convocation. Dr. Strobel is consistently one of the most popular lecturers in Biochemistry courses. His laboratory works on Cytochrome P450 and has trained a large number of students for the Ph.D. degree.
BMB Program Research Retreat

The annual research retreat was held at Camp Allen in March of 2007. This 2-day fun-filled event brought together researchers affiliated with the BMB Program. Posters and short talks by students and postdoctoral fellows provided an impressive overview of research conducted by members of this inter-departmental program.

In addition to the scientific program, participants enjoyed a number of fun activities including horseback riding, tennis, canoeing, hiking and the highly anticipated student skit.

Prizes were awarded for the best scientific presentations. Jade Hatley (Strobel lab) and Xiaofeng Zheng (Li lab) won the prize for best student poster.

The prize for best student oral presentation went to Melissa Adams (Carpenter lab) and Xi Mo (Li lab). Eva Morschl, Ph.D. (Blackburn lab) won for best postdoc poster and Amir Mohsenin, an M.D., Ph.D. candidate (Blackburn lab) and Eva Ramon, Ph.D. (Ridge lab) won the prize for best postdoc oral presentation.

Meet Our New Faculty

Jianping Jin, Ph.D. will begin a new appointment as Assistant Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology during the 2007-08 academic year. Dr. Jin received his Ph.D. in Biochemistry from Texas A & M University in 2000 followed by postdoctoral training at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. He then joined Wade Harper’s group first at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and then at Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA. His research centers on the ubiquitin signaling pathway and DNA damage checkpoint control. He has also developed a number of powerful new research tools including loxP-scan mutagenesis, a human ORFeome retrovirus library and a full-length cDNA ribosome display library. He recently published a first-author paper in Nature (28 June 2007 issue) that reveals new pathways for control of the conjugation of ubiquitin.

Dr. Eric Wagner received his Ph.D. in Molecular Cancer Biology from Duke University where he was named Student Scientist of the Year by the American Cancer Society. He currently holds a postdoctoral appointment at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has held a number of pre- and postdoctoral fellowships. His research interests are in the area of histone pre-mRNA processing. Dr. Wagner has recently received the prestigious K99/R00 NIH Pathway to Independence Award. This program provides funding to outstanding postdoctoral scientists during both their postdoctoral training and their first independent faculty position. After the completion of the postdoctoral phase, Dr. Wagner will join the Biochemistry & Molecular Biology faculty as an Assistant Professor.
Jennifer Gonzalez, a student in Dr. Vasanthi Jayaraman’s laboratory, and Jordan Bell, a student in Dr. Henry Strobel’s laboratory, have each been awarded the NIH Ruth Kirschstein National Research Service Award Predoctoral Fellowship. In 2002, the U.S. Congress renamed the highly competitive NIH National Research Service award in honor of Dr. Kirschstein, a former Acting Director of the NIH. Dr. Kirschstein became the first woman Institute Director at NIH in 1974 and during her illustrious career has played a key role in mobilizing public health responses to polio and AIDS.

Xi Mo (Li Lab) was awarded the 2007 Cameron Foundation Fellowship by the GSBS. She was a co-first author in a paper "Luo, S.-Z., Mo, X., Afshar-Kharghan, V., Srinivasan, S., López, J. A., Li, R. (2007) Blood 109, 603-609. Glycoprotein Ib-alpha forms disulfide bonds with 2 glycoprotein Ib-beta subunits in the resting platelet" that was highlighted by a commentary in Blood.


Eva Ramon, Ph.D., a Research Fellow in Dr. Kevin Ridge’s laboratory, received a 2-yr Beatriu de Pinos Fellowship from the Catalan (Catalonia, Spain) government to study the structure and function of human cone visual pigments.

Kim Mankiewicz (Jayaraman Lab), Xi Mo (Li Lab) and Brian Phillips (Spudich Lab) received the 2007 Dean's Research Award. This competitive award is given out by the Dean of the Medical School through the Graduate School Education Committee to graduate students at the Medical School exhibiting outstanding productivity and expertise in their scientific endeavors. Each received $2500 for this honor.
Transitions

Jun Xie completed her Ph.D. in the Dowhan laboratory in 2006. She is now a postdoctoral fellow in David Russell’s lab at UT Southwestern Medical School in Dallas.

Lee Pullan, Ph.D. (Penczek lab) moved in January 2007 to a position at FEI, an electron microscope company.

Janci Chunn, Amir Mohsenin and Jon Volmer received their Ph.D.’s during the past year under the supervision of Michael Blackburn, Professor and BMB Program Director. Janci is now Senior Scientist at Exponent Consulting in Houston, Amir is now in his third year of medical school here at UT-Houston, and Jon is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In 2007, Yuki Sudo and Toshi Nara, postdoctoral fellows in John Spudich's lab, moved to Assistant Professor positions in Japan at Nagoya University and Hokkaido University, respectively.

About Our Organization

The Graduate Program in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology was established to promote excellence in the scientific pursuits by providing graduate education in an environment that fosters interactions between students and faculty.

The goal of the BMB Program is to develop researchers who have a broad awareness of the content and problems of the biomedical sciences and can apply their experiences to produce new knowledge in the areas of academia and industry.

Acknowledgements

Drs. Julia Lever and Alan Levine prepared this newsletter. We wish to thank all those who contributed information and pictures to make this newsletter possible.