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HHMI Fellowships Jump-Start Six Biomedical Research Careers

Tempered in the fires of personal hardship, six talented young scientists committed themselves to making their world a better place. Today the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) recognized their scientific potential and determination by naming them 2006 Gilliam fellows.

2006 winners of the competitive fellowships are:

- **Jonathan Abraham**

, post-baccalaureate research fellow, National Institutes of Health

- **John Cassady**

"The 2006 Gilliam fellows are an outstanding group of students who were selected for their academic excellence, scientific potential, and individual determination."

- Peter J. Bruns

, undergraduate, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- **Ana Cristancho**

, M.D.-Ph.D. student, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine

- **Tam Nguyen**

, undergraduate, Louisiana State University

- **Kevin O'Brien**

, graduate student, University of Wisconsin

- **Edwin Rodriguez**

, undergraduate, Stanford University

All six established impressive scientific credentials as undergraduates, marking them as promising research scientists. All of them also faced personal challenges that helped turn their sights toward careers in science.

For example, Jonathan Abraham's teenage discovery of the "huge misconception" that Haitians were responsible for the spread of AIDS in the United States convinced the Canadian-born Haitian to conduct infectious disease research and help dispel myths that degrade minorities. And when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August, 2005, it destroyed Tam Nguyen's family home, but it didn't prevent her from submitting her application for a Gilliam fellowship, to enable her to pursue her dream of becoming a physician-scientist and establishing a foundation to bring better medical care and equipment to her native Vietnam.

Gilliam fellowships provide support for doctoral studies for disadvantaged students, including minorities under-represented in the sciences. They are named for the late James H. Gilliam, Jr., a charter Trustee of HHMI who spent a lifetime fostering excellence and diversity in education and science. HHMI awarded Gilliam fellowships for the first time in 2005.

"Jim Gilliam always encouraged HHMI to think creatively about how we could help increase diversity within the ranks of American science professors," said HHMI President Thomas R. Cech. "These fellowships are a fitting tribute to his legacy."

In addition to serving as an HHMI Trustee for nearly 20 years, Gilliam was chief counsel at Knickerbocker LLC, a private investment firm. A longtime resident of Wilmington, Delaware, he had served as Secretary of Community Affairs and Economic Development to former Delaware Governor Pierre S. du Pont IV. For many years, Gilliam also chaired Delaware's Judicial Nominating Commission. He was 58 when he died in 2003.

"The 2006 Gilliam fellows are an outstanding group of students who were selected for their academic excellence, scientific potential, and individual determination," said Peter J. Bruns, HHMI vice president for grants and special programs. "We feel that five years of graduate training support will provide these students with opportunities equal to their abilities."

The new Gilliam fellows are reaching high. Cristancho wants to combine research and clinical practice. Rodriguez looks forward to "a life in academic medicine, treating patients, and leading my own lab to new understandings of disease." Cassady's long-term goal is to develop a stem cell-based treatment

for HIV infection. O'Brien wants to help diversify research and teaching faculty.

Students who participated in HHMI's Exceptional Research Opportunities Program (EXROP) as undergraduates were eligible to apply for Gilliam fellowships. For the past three summers, EXROP students have worked side by side in labs with HHMI investigators and HHMI professors. There, they conducted research on projects ranging from studies of the processes that enable viruses such as HIV to enter cells to the way proteins move across cell membranes in bacteria.

In 2006, the EXROP program will add 55 more undergraduates recommended by HHMI undergraduate science education program directors or HHMI professors at campuses nationwide, selected to do summer research in HHMI investigators' and professors' labs. They will then join the pool of students eligible for Gilliam fellowships for graduate study.

Gilliam fellows will have leadership roles at EXROP meetings -- speaking on panels, leading discussions of graduate student life, or chairing a scientific session -- to enhance their own mentoring skills and to motivate upcoming EXROP students.