Jalina Graham is a sixth year Neuroscience graduate student in Dr. Brian Wiltgen’s lab. She is broadly interested in the way the brain represents and uses context to select the appropriate behavior for a given situation. She uses a combination of neuronal tracers and optogenetics to both observe and manipulate specific projections from the hippocampus (a structure known to be important for the representation of context) to the rest of the brain during ongoing behavior to understand the contributions of these projections to learning and memory. She hopes to continue on in academia and is in the process of securing a postdoctoral position so she can delve deeper into the basic neurobiology of context mediated behavior.

The Ling-Lie Chau Graduate Student Award for Brain Research enabled Jalina to attend the Winter Conference on the Neurobiology of Learning and Memory, where she presented her research in the form of a datablitz and received valuable feedback on her work from leading scientists in the field.
I want to thank you for your generosity. Your contributions allowed me to attend a small format conference focused on recent advances in the neurobiology of learning and memory. Winter Conference 2019 was a unique opportunity to present my research in the form of a datablitz and get feedback on my research from some of the most active minds in my field. I cannot thank you enough.

This was one of the most unique conferences I have ever attended, and it has had a massive positive effect on my career prospects. First of all, attendance is kept small such that labs generally bring only a single post-doc or senior graduate student. It was an intimate setting which was ideal for networking, which is absolutely crucial at this stage in my career. I was able to discuss my research and future plans with several researchers I greatly admire and was able to arrange a number of promising interviews for postdoctoral positions.

Secondly, this particular session of the conference greatly influenced the direction of my career. The main speakers were selected from a pool of individuals who either study memory in humans using tasks that can easily be performed by animal models or animal memory researchers who have adapted human memory tasks or manipulations for their use. Each speaker was limited to 15 minutes of data presentation and then the floor was opened up for general discussion. At the end of each topic (presented by three speakers), we had a more extensive discussion about the overarching principles that could be extracted from the data and what this meant for memory research as a whole. Thinking about direct comparisons between human and animal work is extremely rare in my field, due to obvious differences in cognitive and language abilities between humans and animals and this conference was the first time I saw a large group of researchers who had attempted it. Because of this, I reached out to researchers who have taken this approach in their work and hope to work with them as a postdoc or future collaborators.

Your philanthropy has opened up a world of opportunity for me. I am interviewing with researchers I never would have thought to contact before. Most importantly, I have gained a new perspective on what is possible and have a clearer view of what I want to do in the future. None of this would have happened if not for you.

Sincerest thanks,

Jalina