Rappaport Gift is Culmination of Two Decades of Basic Neuroscience Support

Phyllis and Jerry Rappaport take two things very seriously: McLean Hospital’s leadership in neuroscience research and the importance of emerging leaders in advancing the field of psychiatry. As evidence, and a capstone to a 20-year relationship with the hospital, the couple has endowed both McLean’s division of basic neuroscience — now called the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Center of Excellence in Basic Neuroscience Research — and established the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Endowed Chair in Psychiatry. Bill Carlezon, PhD, is chief of the newly named division and has been installed as the inaugural incumbent of the Rappaport chair.

Recognizing A Leader

The Rappaports are thrilled that Carlezon is the first to occupy the newly endowed chair. “We first met Dr. Carlezon at a National Council event,” said Jerry. “He gave one of the best presentations we’ve ever experienced. Our foundation funds talent, and Dr. Carlezon is a talented researcher, well-known for his work. As chief of the Division of Basic Neuroscience at McLean, he has provided crucial support to our Rappaport fellows over the years. His energy, enthusiasm and generative style make him a natural educator and mentor.”

It was Carlezon’s pioneering work in developing a procedure called viral gene transfer that put him on the neuroscience map. The technique enables scientists to use engineered viruses to transfer genes into the brain in order to control the function of neurons and neuronal circuits. Over the decades, this technique has enabled transformative new insights into how the brain adapts to experience, and more recently it is opening up new avenues of treatment. Now Carlezon has been recognized with “a career-defining honor” as the first occupant of the Rappaport endowed chair — one of the highest honors for any leader in academia. “I’m proud to be affiliated with a family that has done so much for so many people,” said Carlezon.

The Rappaports’ gift allows Carlezon to invest in supplementary activities that enrich the Center’s research agenda, but aren’t typically covered by government grants. Examples include expanding diversity through initiatives like McLean’s Mental Health Research Summer Program (see story on p. 4) and participating in events that bring together psychiatrists and neuroscientists to bridge gaps between research and clinical practice.

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“Our contributions to McLean reflect our respect for the critical role that the hospital has played in leading the fight to treat and cure the myriad forms of mental illness for all ages and genders.”

Phyllis Rappaport

On the Horizon

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Dear Friends

As I write this, it’s striking to reflect on what a very different summer this is than 2020. McLean has come through this pandemic deeply grounded in our mission. The stories in this edition feature some of the most vibrant aspects of our work, such as personal connections, innovation and diversity.

Our first piece tells of a generous gift that celebrates leadership and innovation. It is the culmination of a long and trusted relationship with a family who has chosen McLean as the recipient of years of philanthropy. Their recent gift will serve to both sustain and advance emerging leaders in neuroscience research for years to come.

Next, you’ll read about a couple that has chosen to support young researchers probing better treatments for obsessive compulsive disorder. Hope, determination and innovation are the defining features of their efforts.

As McLean, in conjunction with our parent organization Mass General Brigham, continues its strong commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, we launched an initiative enabling seven promising college students of color to work in McLean labs as research fellows while they receive professional support, mentorship and assistance in developing the skills they will need to pursue careers in the neuroscience field.

Finally, after a year-long hiatus, members of the McLean Board of Visitors gathered in the virtual realm to reconnect and hear research, clinical and educational updates from McLean leadership. And the annual Ride for Mental Health came back in person in June with record attendance and some much-needed social connection.

Stay well,

Lori Etringer
Senior Vice President and Chief Development Officer

Board of Visitors Convenes Using a Virtual Platform

The McLean Board of Visitors (BoV) gathers annually to connect and learn about current innovations in research, clinical care and training at McLean. Sally Lee is a longtime member of the group and a former patient at McLean. She credits the hospital for saving her life and now pays it forward through advocacy, philanthropy and enthusiastic involvement in the BoV. Lee appreciates the annual meetings as an opportunity to share her perspective and hear that of others. “For me, the Board of Visitors is a group that helps reduce the stigma of a mental illness, which I’d like to see go away once and for all,” said Lee.

This group of nearly 200 individuals hails from all over the United States and share a deep interest in mental health issues and a keen dedication to McLean. Like Lee, they serve as ambassadors and advocates, and many support the hospital through philanthropic giving.

Because of the pandemic, the popular gathering did not occur in 2020, and the ability to gather and reconnect was missed. This past spring, with the pandemic waning, but not yet in our rear-view mirrors, the group gathered virtually.

The May 5 meeting saw record attendance with nearly 100 guests logging in to participate, learn, ask questions and share stories and personal experiences. “The session was fantastic! I wanted more time. So interesting and so relevant,” said one new member.

McLean President and Psychiatrist in Chief Scott L. Rauch, MD, opened the meeting with a hospital update. He spoke about growth and resilience, the challenges of a global pandemic and the increased need for mental health services. His message was one of confidence, innovation and forward momentum. Rauch welcomed new trustees, reviewed McLean’s overall response to and recovery from the COVID pandemic, reaffirmed the hospital’s commitment to anti-racist, justice and health-equity efforts, shared news of McLean’s expanding clinical services and expressed his deep gratitude for the Board of Visitors and his pride in the faculty and staff at McLean who have worked tirelessly to provide services during an historically difficult year.

Shelly Greenfield, MD, MPH, chief of McLean’s Center of Excellence in Women’s Mental Health, shared her expertise in a presentation about women and alcohol, and Matt Siegel, host of the “Matty in the Morning” FM radio show, offered his heartfelt gratitude to McLean for the hospital’s care of a loved one.

The small group break-out sessions, once again, saw robust participation. Led by McLean researchers and clinicians, guests were able connect in a more intimate way and many shared their own personal experiences with mental illness. “I learned a lot and felt heard, and there was an openness and connection among the participants I hadn’t expected,” remarked one participant.

The virtual nature of the meeting was a success, enabling members to join from the comfort of their own homes without the challenges of travel. The Board of Visitors will gather again in May 2022, whether it be in person or a hybrid model, it is certain to create a lasting impression.
“Some of the most productive professional relationships happen when you meet someone at a conference poster session or you’re sitting having lunch together. These chance meetings can result in interesting collaborations and new discoveries that wouldn’t have happened otherwise,” said Carlezon. “This gift will benefit McLean’s neuroscience community in ways that weren’t previously possible.”

Rappaport Fellows
In 2000, Phyllis and Jerry established the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Mental Health Research Scholars Endowed Fund at McLean. The highly sought-after Rappaport Fellowships are competitive, one-year research grants and recipients are often able to leverage the grants to obtain federal funding to continue their projects. Since then they have supported dozens of Rappaport Research Fellows — up-and-coming investigators in the fields of neurology, imaging and clinical research. The Rappaports’ endowed fellowship now supports three fellows a year, impacting not only the careers of the awardees, but the entire field, according to Carlezon. “These talented young researchers are advancing our understanding of the biological basis of psychiatric illnesses. The Rappaports’ support enables them to pursue new ideas that are higher risk than those that would be funded by the federal government.”

“Over the past 20 years, our partnership with McLean has produced a remarkable number of very talented scientists who have gone on to pursue significant research on schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, addiction and depression, as well as basic research into neuroscience and the brain,” said Jerry. Added Phyllis: “And many of our Rappaport Fellows have stayed at McLean, contributing to the hospital’s legacy and reputation.”

A Long and Personal Relationship
The Rappaports’ support and confidence in McLean continues to be personal.

“Our contributions to McLean reflect our respect for the critical role that the hospital has played in leading the fight to treat and cure the myriad forms of mental illnesses for all ages and genders,” said Phyllis. They were founding members of the McLean National Council, which was established in 2002 to help McLean broaden its donor base nationally and thereby grow its resources to enhance McLean’s mission impact, reputation and reach. They said their gift speaks to their gratitude for the hospital’s treatment of three generations of family members and their confidence in its position as a leader in psychiatric care, research and education.

“Jerry and Phyllis have been trusted friends and supporters of McLean for two decades,” said Scott L. Rauch, MD, president and psychiatrist in chief. “They have an astute understanding of how vital it is to invest in talented, young investigators in the quest to advance basic neuroscience discoveries more broadly. This insight — backed by their generosity over the years — has been extraordinary. This latest gift is a meaningful way to associate their impact on McLean and basic neuroscience research for generations.”

“Phyllis and Jerry have been trusted friends and supporters of McLean for two decades. They have an astute understanding of how vital it is to invest in talented, young investigators in the quest to advance basic neuroscience more broadly. This insight — backed by their generosity over the years — has been extraordinary.”

Scott L. Rauch, MD, President and Psychiatrist in Chief, McLean Hospital
“Racial and ethnic diversity in science is essential to delivering excellence and superior innovations,” said Stephanie Pinder-Amaker, PhD, McLean’s chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer.

McLean President and Psychiatrist in Chief Scott L. Rauch, MD, along with Pinder-Amaker and other members of McLean leadership have championed this concept and are working together to develop a variety of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across the hospital. McLean’s new Mental Health Research Summer Program (MMHRSP), directed by Nigerian-born neuroscientist Oluwarotimi (Timi) Folorunso, PhD, is one of the hospital’s newest efforts in this arena.

Folorunso would like to see more people who look like him have access to the training and support needed to embark on careers in research. Toward this goal, McLean leadership teamed up with Folorunso and a group of his colleagues to develop the new program for promising BIPOC college students, with funding from several generous donors. Seven such students were selected as fellows and placed into McLean research labs within the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Center of Excellence in Basic Neuroscience Research and the Center for Depression, Anxiety and Stress Research (CDASR). Each fellow received a $6,000 stipend for the 10-week program.

The MMHRSP, however, is more than just an opportunity to gain research experience and committed mentorship. Through interactive workshops, guidance on effectively communicating research, and advice on applying to graduate school, MMHRSP exposes its fellows to resources and skills that are critical to the success of a budding scientist.

In addition, the MMHRSP is supporting each fellow to apply for and present at the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students. “One of our immediate goals is to get the students into good graduate programs where they can do top-notch research in an environment that allows them to flourish,” explained Folorunso. “Creating a scientific abstract and presenting at a national conference is experience that will make them more competitive graduate school applicants.”

Aspiring BIPOC Scientists Often Lack Support and Role Models

“At McLean, we’ve been exploring how to address what we call ‘leakage’ in the neuroscience pipeline for BIPOC students,” said Folorunso, who works as a research fellow in Dr. Darrick Balu’s Translational Research Laboratory. That “leakage”— when BIPOC students leave the neuroscience field — is attributable to many factors, including late exposure to neuroscience research which may increase imposter syndrome, a lack of committed mentors, as well as the number of culturally sensitive and competent non-BIPOC scientists around them, according to Folorunso. “To fill this void, BIPOC scientists often take on multiple roles, including serving on diversity committees and acting as a spokesperson for underrepresented groups, which puts a strain on their primary focus, which is to conduct research.”

MMHRSP Fellow Kianna Barrett, an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said she’s grown accustomed to seeing few people of color in healthcare settings. “Whether going to a doctor’s office or to a science class, seeing another person of color gives me a huge sense of relief. I instantly feel more comfortable, heard and welcomed,” she said. “I want to be a voice and advocate for others in my community. This program is allowing me to act on that goal.”

Donors Step in To Support the Program

The summer program was able to launch at this critical time thanks to the support of several generous donors, including Ken Rossano, a McLean honorary trustee and long-time supporter of young scientists, and Mary and Bob Lentz. The Lentzes were looking for a way to

“I want to be a voice and advocate for others in my community. This program is allowing me to act on this goal.”

MMHRSP Fellow Kianna Barrett
respond to the many racial inequities laid bare by the pandemic. The new program appealed to their interest in mental health and their desire to support underrepresented populations. “We loved it because it supported not just the fellows, but the many people who will be impacted by the research these young scientists will go on to do,” said Mary.

Mac Dorris, also a long-time McLean supporter and founder of the annual Ride for Mental Health (see p. 8), chose to direct some of his philanthropy to this program. “It’s so important for world-class research facilities like McLean to take leadership roles in promoting diversity and inclusion,” said Dorris. “I’m thrilled to support this exciting program and would love to see it flourish and continue for years to come.” Other McLean donors were also instrumental in bringing this initiative to fruition.

Fellows Gain Research Experience and Knowledge on How to Build Careers

This summer’s participants hail from a range of universities in the area. (To be eligible for the program, a student must attend a two- or four-year college in Massachusetts or be a state resident.) The students were matched to labs that reflect their interests, which range from post-traumatic stress disorder to depression to substance use disorder to autism.

Prior to the start of the program, the MMHRSP Committee reached out to all principal investigators (PIs) of the Rappaport Center of Excellence in Neuroscience Research and CDASR to gauge interest and availability to host a fellow. Importantly, volunteering as a PI for this program involves not only hosting students in their labs, but also requires them to serve as active mentors, attend seminars and meetings, and work closely with students to help them prepare research presentations.

It was important to Folorunso and the committee that the students receive continuous mentorship from established BIPOC neuroscientists, so each fellow has been paired with a year long BIPOC mentor from outside McLean. Finally, fellows will participate in ongoing K-12 neuroscience outreach through collaborations with McLean’s Brains Matter! Program and the Harvard Medical School Black Postdoctoral Association.

Increasing Diversity at McLean and Beyond

The MMHRSP will be as beneficial to McLean as it is to the program’s participants, explained Elena Chartoff, PhD, the program’s principal investigator and director of the Neurobiology of Motivated Behavior Lab. Her hope is that increasing the number of BIPOC researchers (and aspiring ones) on campus will be self-perpetuating. “I imagine students and post-docs who are thinking of coming to McLean seeing people who look like them on campus. That sends the message that this is a welcoming place and an institution where they might find their professional home,” she explained.

Like the program’s supporters, Folorunso believes the impact of the program could eventually go far beyond McLean. “I would love to see these fellows pursue careers in neuroscience and then go on to inspire the next generation of BIPOC neuroscientists. I’d also like to see the success of our program inspire other institutions to follow suit.”

“We loved [the program] because it supported not just the fellows, but the many people who will be impacted by the research these young scientists will go on to do.”

Mary Lentz
There are different ways to implement ERP,” explained the researcher, Jennie Kuckertz, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow at the OCD Institute at McLean (OCDI). “I’m interested in discovering the mechanisms at work in ERP. How can we look at the person in front of us and identify what approach to ERP would be most helpful?”

Kuckertz is one of four talented investigators at the beginning of their careers whose research has been supported by the Hellers. The others are Martha Falkenstein, PhD, Jake Nota, PhD, and Nathaniel Van Kirk, PhD. Falkenstein uses machine learning, a technique that finds insights in large amounts of data, to improve therapy. Nota investigates how disrupted sleep cycles and low alertness affect the success of OCD treatment. And Van Kirk’s research tracks patients’ heart rates, movement and other variables through wearable sensors to better understand how treatment is working.

“The Hellers have been truly instrumental in forwarding our research agenda,” said OCDI Program Director Diane Davey, RN, MBA. “These young investigators have gone on to obtain their own outside research grants, thanks to the work the Hellers supported.” Jason Krompinger, PhD, director of psychological services and clinical research, added that “the research they’ve enabled helps inform our clinical decision making, which in turn has improved the care we provide.”

Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) is the gold standard therapy for people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). But for some reason, it wasn’t effective for Anne and Andy Heller’s family member. So the couple, who are members of McLean’s National Council and generous donors to OCD research at McLean, are pleased to be supporting a promising young researcher who is looking into why the therapy doesn’t work well for some patients.

“Treatment that Exposes Patients to Triggers
Exposure and Response Prevention encourages patients to do the things they fear — touching a public restroom toilet, uttering a curse word, holding a knife — then helps them refrain from the ritualized behavior. The person learns that it’s possible to endure the trigger without engaging in the compulsion. Ideally, the feeling of self-efficacy builds each time the behavior is avoided.

Kuckertz said her research is revealing that some patients may respond better to ERP if the therapist emphasizes that feeling of self-efficacy. “The therapist might need to spend more time before and after the exposure helping the person think about their ability to cope, what coping looks like for them and areas where their reaction to the trigger didn’t match their expectation,” she explained.

The Hellers said that they’ve been impressed with McLean’s OCD research and treatment programs and the constant interplay between the two. “As in any field, young minds offer new and creative ways to approach a subject, bringing creative energy to their area of expertise,” said Anne. “They can potentially challenge antiquated concepts and offer fresh perspectives and innovation. It’s been exciting to witness Jennie’s accolades and awards during her short time at McLean.”

McLean offers different levels of treatment — from residential to partial hospital to outpatient — for people of all ages, including a new satellite program in Houston, Texas (see p. 7).
McLean Opens OCD Program in Houston

McLean is now offering its acclaimed OCD expertise in Texas. The McLean OCD Institute at Houston is a result of a new partnership between McLean and the former Houston OCD Program founded by Thröstur Björgvinsson, PhD, in 2009. Björgvinsson is also on the McLean Hospital staff and is serving as a senior advisor to the new Institute. The merger became effective in March 2020.

The Houston program offers residential and outpatient treatment for adults as well as intensive outpatient treatment for adolescents. Elizabeth McIngvale, PhD, LCSW, a renowned expert on OCD, is program director of the McLean OCD Institute at Houston. The new program has done joint trainings with the Belmont-based program and the hope is that eventually they’ll collaborate on research as well, according to OCD Institute Program Director Diane Davey, RN, MBA.

“Our program in Massachusetts is in great demand and currently over-subscribed, so being able to offer treatment to more people in a different region of the country is another important way we’re fulfilling our mission,” said Davey.

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Mac Dorris has done it again. After pivoting to a virtual ride in 2020, Mac invited cyclists back in person June 19-20 to the annual Ride for Mental Health in New Paltz, NY. Mac founded the event in 2017 as a way to honor and remember his son Eric who died from a drug overdose while in treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder. To date, the Ride has raised $800,000 for research, training and clinical care at McLean Hospital.

To Mac’s delight, 437 cyclists participated this year, 70 of whom rode virtually. “This is the best turnout yet,” said Mac. “It proves that we have a growing community of people who want to raise awareness — and funding — for mental health issues.”

The New Paltz course is visually stunning with routes of varying lengths and difficulty that wend their way through the gorgeous scenery of the Hudson Valley. This year, Mac asked cyclists to wear their Ride for Mental Health jerseys (sponsored by JIS Orthopedics). The image of hundreds of cyclists in identical jerseys created a spectacular sea of blue. “It was wonderful,” said Mac. “A visual symbol of everyone riding to support the same cause.”

Stay tuned for information about the 2022 Ride and consider joining Team McLean. Read more about the event at rideformentalhealth.org.