

THE JOHNS HOPKINS KIMMEL CANCER CENTER

# BREAST MATTERS

2023/2024

Turning Research  
into Results





# A VERY FOND FAREWELL

**THIS FALL MARKS** a time of leadership transition of the Breast Cancer Program at the Kimmel Cancer Center. Our talented faculty members are highly sought after, and **Vered Stearns, M.D.**, Program Director and Breast Cancer Research Chair in Oncology was recruited by Weill-Cornell Medicine to lead its translational breast cancer program. After 21 years as a faculty member, Dr. Stearns begins her new position in New York on November 1.

Highly regarded by her colleagues, trainees, and patients alike, Dr. Stearns served as Director of the Women’s Malignancies Disease Group and as Medical Director of the Under Armour Breast Health Innovation Center.

Speaking at a recent Fetting Fund event, **Nancy Davidson, M.D.**, who preceded Dr. Stearns as Director of the Breast Cancer program, noted her many accomplishments over her leadership tenure. Dr. Stearns built a strong translational research program around innovative clinical trials, she said, and pointed out that her work in pharmacogenetics – which looks at how genetic factors affect the way the body reacts to drugs – enables oncologists to better tailor treatment to individual patients.

“We are so much the better here in Baltimore for what Dr. Stearns accomplished,” Dr. Davidson said. “Our field is so much the better. Patients are so much the better.”

Dr. Stearns’ clinical research has focused on improving current therapies by individualizing strategies for treatment and prevention of breast cancer. She was among the first to evaluate the role of specific

cancer-related genetic mutations with breast cancer survivors who had been treated with tamoxifen to prevent the reoccurrence of disease. She also has led similar research on the association between genetic mutations and outcomes for women treated with aromatase inhibitors, a class of drugs used to treat breast cancer in post-menopausal women.

Among her many honors, Dr. Stearns was selected by Forbes in 2017 as one of 27 top breast cancer oncologists in the country. In 2022, Dr. Stearns she received the Kimmel Cancer Center Mentoring Award in recognition of her dedication to trainees and faculty members.

Dr. Stearns joins Weill-Cornell Medicine as Director of Translational Breast Cancer in the Department of Medicine and Associate Director for Clinical Affairs at the Meyer Cancer Center. In her new role, she looks forward to developing programs and mentoring team members across cancer types at sites in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens.

“As you can imagine it has been a hard decision, and what made it most difficult is the need to say goodbye to many friends and colleagues, the amazing team members, and to my patients,” says Dr. Stearns. “I am pleased to remain an Adjunct Professor and maintain my many collaborations.”

## Antonio Wolff Appointed Interim Director

**ANTONIO WOLFF, M.D.**, an internationally recognized translational researcher, has been named Interim Director of the Women’s Malignancies Disease Group at the Kimmel Cancer Center.

Dr. Wolff currently serves as Director of Breast Cancer Trials. A practicing breast cancer medical oncologist and translational researcher, he is Panel Co-Chair and a lead author of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO)/College of American Pathology clinical practice guidelines on HER2 and hormone receptor testing in breast cancer. The Susan G. Komen Fellow chairs the Breast Cancer Committee of ECOG-ACRIN, a nationwide cancer research and clinical trials network, and serves on the Breast Cancer Steering Committee of the National Cancer Institute-funded National Clinical Trials Network (NCTN).

Dr. Wolff served as Associate Editor of the Journal of Clinical Oncology

from 2012 – 2022. He was identified as one of the world’s most highly cited clinical researchers in 2017 by Clarivate

Analytics, which speaks to his influence on the field of clinical and translational cancer research.

Of his new role, Dr. Wolff said, “Dr. Stearns established a strong multidisciplinary group devoted to providing excellent and compassionate breast cancer care and access to innovative clinical trials to patients in Baltimore and the National Capital Region. It will be my privilege to serve as interim director to continue to build on her work and on the strong traditions of our Women’s Malignancies Disease Group.”



## Meet Integrative Medicine Expert Ta-Ya Lee

**TA-YA LEE JOINED** the Kimmel Cancer Center in February, providing integrative medicine consultation to patients through the Under Armour Breast Health Innovation Center. A licensed acupuncturist with a Ph.D. in acupuncture from Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, China, Dr. Lee has been practicing patient-centered care in the traditions of Eastern and Western Medicine for more than 25 years. Most recently, she completed an Integrative Oncology Fellowship at University of Michigan. Joining the Kimmel Cancer Center is a homecoming of sorts for Dr. Lee. She served as an oncology research nurse for the School of Nursing in the mid-1990s and earned one of her three doctoral degrees and three of her four master’s degrees from the Johns Hopkins Schools of Nursing,

Business and Public Health, respectively.

*What do you like most about your work? What drives you professionally and personally?*

The Kimmel Cancer Center provides a great opportunity to practice and expand integrative medicine for our patients and utilize all of my training and knowledge from the past. As an oncology research nurse in the 1990s, patients inspired me to become an acupuncturist to use non-pharmacological intervention to address the side effects of

chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

Integrative medicine training allowed me to grow professionally to provide unique individualized care for each patient. I trained at the Bravewell Integrative Fellowship in 2008. Not only was I inspired, but I was learning new concepts as a young child does, two to three new concepts per day. I read, I saw the importance of integrated medicine, not alternative but



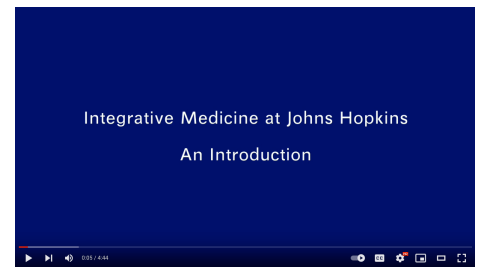
true integrative, synergistic medicine. After learning 5 Elements acupuncture in the U.S., I realized it had great merit, but I needed to learn the history, philosophy and research. In the U.S. acupuncture research is growing. Going to Japan yearly, I got so vested in Toyohari Japanese-style acupuncture. It was incredible working with some of the best researchers and practitioners in the world. Finally, I was hearing horror stories about plastic surgeries for facial rejuvenation, so for two years I studied Acupuncture Facial Rejuvenation. Now I can help people who wish to have a face lift and wrinkle reduction by using acupuncture needles

to guide the body's own energy system to help itself without surgery. For me, after learning five completely different styles of acupuncture you can integrate them for best practices. The sum of all styles is truly greater than the parts.

***What is the most challenging aspect of your work?***

There are very limited resources and referrals to provide integrative medicine, which we will expand. Hopefully, we can gradually build up referral hubs for cancer patients to utilize acupuncture, massage therapy, music therapy, meditation, nutrition consult, resilience training,

hypnosis, Tai chi or Yoga or Qigong.



We are grateful for support from Under Armour to bring integrative medicine services to our patients with breast cancer. To learn more about integrative medicine and Dr. Lee, watch this video [youtu.be/w9g7ncqUboM](https://youtu.be/w9g7ncqUboM)

## New Program to Protect Survivors' Heart Health



Left to right: Kendall Moseley, M.D., Kate Pisano, Erin Michos M.D., Liz Raymond, Tina Zhang, M.D., Wen Shen, M.D., Vered Stearns, M.D.

**AS WOMEN TRANSITION** into and through menopause, the decline of ovarian hormones puts them at risk of developing a host of health conditions. Menopause is associated with insulin resistance and metabolic syndrome, placing women at this life stage at increased risk for diabetes and heart disease. Certain breast cancer treatments place survivors at even greater risk.

A new study from the Women's Wellness and Healthy Aging Program at Johns Hopkins aims to improve health outcomes and help ensure healthy transitions by identifying and coordinating care for those most at risk.

The Women's Wellness and Healthy Aging Program is led by co-directors gynecologist **Wen Shen, M.D.**, and breast cancer expert **Vered Stearns, M.D.**, is a coordinated effort of dedicated specialists from departments across Johns Hopkins Medicine to provide excellent patient care, evidence-based health education, and social support for women transitioning into and through their post reproductive years. Program Coordinator and Patient Navigator **Kate Pisano** works with physicians and patients to facilitate medical consultations and connect patients with educational resources and support groups.

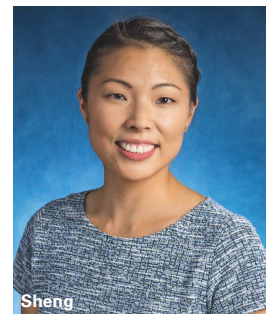
After treatment for breast cancer, the transition of care from medical oncology to primary care can result in delays in screening for diabetes and heart disease risk factors. The Women's Wellness and Healthy Aging Program Cardiometabolic Study seeks to identify patients at higher risk for both through a formalized screening program. Patients at risk are directed to appropriate specialists at the Johns Hopkins or in the community.

"The Cardiometabolic Screening Program has helped us identify individuals with elevated cholesterol who warrant evaluation with cardiology or re-evaluation or reestablishment of a primary care doctor," said the study's principal investigator **Jenni Sheng, M.D.** "The program has also assisted in identifying those with excess weight who may benefit from institutional resources for weight loss."

Those resources and referrals may include

Cardiology for cardiovascular disease prevention, the Johns Hopkins Healthful Eating, Activity and Weight Program at the Kimmel Cancer Center at Greenspring Station, Endocrinology for diabetes management, and clinical trials for weight management.

For more information on the WWHAP Cardiometabolic Study or to join please email [womenswellness@jhmi.edu](mailto:womenswellness@jhmi.edu).



Sheng

# Comprehensive Support for Those with Metastatic Breast Cancer

ONCE BREAST CANCER has spread beyond the breast and local lymph nodes to other places in the body, it is rarely cured, and is called metastatic breast cancer. Those who have metastatic breast cancer, may live with their disease for many years. To optimize care for these patients, members of the Breast Cancer Program established the Hope at Hopkins Clinic, a multi-pronged quality improvement project at the Under Armour Breast Health Innovation Center and at Johns Hopkins Sibley Memorial Hospital.

The project started in 2020 and was made possible with funding through a grant from the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) and Pfizer, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Under Armour. Patients with metastatic cancer were invited to participate in the Clinic, in addition to receiving their usual care. After completing a

baseline patient reported outcomes survey, participants were offered a menu of services, including cancer rehabilitation, supportive oncology, integrative medicine, social work, nutrition, navigation, and access to other individualized services. A comprehensive care plan, focused on optimizing treatment, managing symptoms, and promoting wellness, is created for each patient.

Patients were asked to evaluate their experience three days after their clinic session and at three and six months after their care plan was delivered.

From November 2020 to June 2022, 53 patients were referred, and 44 (83%) completed baseline surveys and participated in the Hope at Hopkins Clinic, with 37 (84%) receiving individualized care plans. The overall experience was so successful from the perspective of both patients and

clinicians that the program is formally implementing a new multidisciplinary model. Patients with a new diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer now receive a kit with individualized assessment, educational materials, and recommendations to help guide those living with metastatic breast cancer.

Watch this video for more on how we are helping patients with metastatic breast cancer:



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPmG0ou7\\_RY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPmG0ou7_RY)

## Empowering Under-Represented Women to Embrace Their Breast Health

A BEACON OF RESILIENCE and hope, Laura Crandon, a two-time breast cancer survivor and thriver, founded Touch4Life to eradicate the disparities in breast cancer outcomes for Black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) and underserved communities. Her personal triumph over breast cancer stands as a testament to the critical importance of early detection and proactive breast health management, a message she passionately carries to communities that have historically been marginalized in healthcare narratives. Through Touch4Life, Laura's unwavering commitment unfolds, amplifying her life-affirming message and emboldening BIPOC women to embrace a proactive stance toward their breast health, ensuring early detection and improved breast cancer outcomes.

The deeply personal losses Laura experienced as her friends faced late-stage diagnoses underscore the urgency



of Touch4Life's mission. Committed to the elimination of late-stage breast cancer diagnoses in BIPOC communities, Touch4Life champions education, empowerment, and resource provision, laying the foundation for a future where a breast cancer diagnosis is not a death sentence, but a manageable health condition with a 100% survival rate.

This bold vision is fortified by initiatives like B-FRESH (Breastie-Food Restores, Energizes and Sustains Health), a program dedicated to bolstering the physical and emotional well-being of BIPOC women and their families navigating breast cancer. Recognized for its innovative and impactful approach, B-FRESH was re-awarded a grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University. This accolade is an endorsement of the significant strides Touch4Life is making under Laura's inspired leadership. As a devoted advocate and ally, Laura's partnership with Johns Hopkins University and Hospital deepens the impact of her work, solidifying her position as a front-line warrior in the battle for breast health equity and continually reinforcing her commitment to a world where every individual has an equal opportunity for health, healing, and a vibrant life beyond breast cancer.

# The Power of Breast Cancer Prevention

## Fetting Fund Updates and New Professorship in Translational Breast Cancer Prevention

**WE ARE GRATEFUL** to the generous donors to the Fetting Fund. Established 13 years ago, more than \$5 million has been raised to support breast cancer prevention research. Funds are also used to support the efforts of researchers.

We are pleased to announce that **Cynthia Zahnow, Ph.D.**, was named the 2023-2024 Fetting Fund Scholar and will receive support from the

John Fetting Fund for Breast Cancer Prevention to continue her research on how alcohol contributes to increased risk of developing of breast cancer. A breast cancer survivor herself, Dr. Zahnow is an expert in epigenetics, or the study of chemical alterations that help control gene expression and can turn genes on and off, contributing to cancer development. While alcohol consumption increases breast cancer

risk for women of all ages, Dr. Zahnow believes younger women may be most vulnerable because breast tissue is most sensitive to environmental exposures before a first pregnancy. By studying the underlying mechanisms, Dr. Zahnow aims to develop an alcohol-induced epigenetic profile that could help identify women who may be at most risk for developing breast cancer so that they can make informed decisions about alcohol consumption that could help reduce it.

“To ensure the growth and sustainability of our research efforts, we are raising funds for a new Professorship in Translational Breast Cancer Prevention,” says **Vered Stearns, M.D.**, Breast Cancer Program Director. “This professorship will provide an anchor for a comprehensive approach to breast cancer prevention research at the Kimmel Cancer Center. With new funds, we will seek to attract candidates with the extraordinary opportunities for groundbreaking translational research at Hopkins. The program leader will work with our already successful translational investigators in breast cancer and in other types of cancer. Your contribution will have significant impact on women in the near term and into the distant future.”



Cynthia Zahnow, Ph.D. with John Fetting, M.D.



*Celebrating 13 years of the Fetting Fund for Breast Cancer Prevention.*

Watch the video:

[youtu.be/6gmCjWJv3NM](https://youtu.be/6gmCjWJv3NM)

# NOTEWORTHY

## [ Faculty Announcements ]

**Princess Mark-Adjeli, M.D., M.P.H.**, has joined the Kimmel Cancer Center in the National Capital Region as a clinical associate in the Women's

Malignancies Disease Group at Sibley Memorial Hospital. Dr. Mark-Adjeli is board-certified in medical oncology, having recently completed

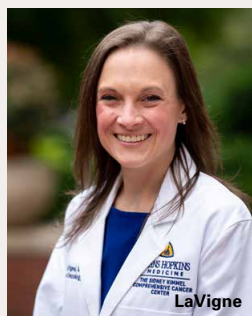


her hematology-oncology fellowship at the National Institutes of Health/National Cancer Institute, where she focused on the clinical investigation of gynecological malignancies. Prior to joining the NIH, she was a medical oncology fellow at Oklahoma State University-Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Tulsa, OK, focusing on breast tumors and cancer care in the community. She previously served as Chief Medical Resident in internal medicine at Long Island Community Hospital in Patchogue, NY. She earned her medical degree from American University of Antigua College of Medicine, St. John, Antigua and Barbuda, and her Bachelor of Science in Biology from Rhode Island College. Dr. Mark-Adjeli, who speaks Akan, will see patients with breast cancer and gynecologic malignancies.

**Annie White LaVigne, M.D.**, has joined the Kimmel Cancer Center's Breast Cancer Program in Radiation Oncology where she will care for patients in East Baltimore as well as launch the department's first dedicated palliative radiation service, PRISM (Palliative Radiation in Supportive Medicine). With undergraduate de-

grees in Human Developmental and Regenerative Biology and Studio Art from Harvard College, Dr. LaVigne completed her medical degree at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and her internship in internal medicine with the Johns Hopkins Osler Medical Training Program. Dr. LaVigne is interested in forging an intersection between the health humanities and radiation oncology by leveraging the field as a new approach to translational research and health equity, with a focus on palliative oncology. She was a former Chief

Resident of the Johns Hopkins Radiation Oncology Program and a 2021-2022 Health Humanities Distinction Track Scholar, recipient of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine Frank L. Coulson Resident Clinical Excellence Award, and a 2023 inductee to the Alpha Omega Honor Medical Society. As a resident at Johns Hopkins, Dr. LaVigne founded and continues to lead Reflection Rounds, a monthly departmental series that inspires reflection on diverse themes through visual and narrative art. Her work at the intersection of art and medicine has been featured in several academic journals, including JAMA Oncology and Practical Radiation Oncology.



The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) awarded **Eveda Toska, Ph.D.**, the Cancer Research Early Career Award, which recognizes outstanding early career investi-

gators who have authored peer-reviewed, original articles published in its flagship journal that have made a significant impact on

the field. Dr. Toska, whose research focuses on understanding the role that transcriptional and epigenetic regulators play in cancer development and therapeutic response with a focus on breast cancer, received the honor and \$1,500 cash prize for her published article, "The Oncogenic PI3K-Induced Transcriptomic Landscape Reveals Key Functions in Splicing and Gene Expression Regulation."



**Saraswati Sukumar, Ph.D.**, Barbara B. Rubenstein Professor of Oncology, was inducted as a Fellow of the National Academy of Inventors (NAI). The NAI Fellows Program was established to highlight academic inventors who have demonstrated a prolific spirit of innovation in creating or facilitating outstanding inventions that have made a tangible impact on quality of life, economic development and the welfare of society. Election to NAI Fellow status is the highest professional distinction accorded solely to academic inventors.



# STAY CONNECTED

The Kimmel Cancer Center's Breast Cancer Patient Navigation team hosts three free, virtual monthly networking and support groups for patients and caregivers. Women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, are in survivorship, or are living with metastatic disease are welcome.

Presentations from Kimmel Cancer Center experts and providers from the surrounding community provide information, ground group discussions, and allow a safe jumping off point from which women can explore emotions related to symptom management, life changes, and disease prognosis.

The groups are facilitated by the Breast Cancer Program patient navigators/health educators **Elizabeth Saylor, M.S.W.**, and **Jill Mull, M.Ed.**, and Women's Wellness and Healthy Aging Program coordinator **Kate Pisano**.

These support groups and other educational programs are shared in a weekly Monday Minute email. To be included on the Monday Minute list, please email your name and the group you'd like to attend to [breastevents@jhmi.edu](mailto:breastevents@jhmi.edu).



## Early Stage Young Breast Cancer Survivors

Young breast cancer survivors in and beyond treatment meet monthly via Zoom. Email Jill Mull, [jmull1@jhmi.edu](mailto:jmull1@jhmi.edu) to receive Monday Minute updates.

## MBC Survivors and Thrivers

The Metastatic Breast Cancer Group meets monthly via Zoom. Email Elizabeth Saylor [esaylor4@jhmi.edu](mailto:esaylor4@jhmi.edu) to receive Monday Minute updates.

## Early Stage Over 50 Breast Cancer Survivors

This group for 50+ years old breast cancer survivors in and beyond treatment meets monthly via Zoom. Email **Kate Pisano** at [womenswellness@jhmi.edu](mailto:womenswellness@jhmi.edu) to receive Monday Minute updates.

These support groups are made possible by grant funding from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and generous donors.

## Help Us Make a Difference

Each contribution to the Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center makes a difference in the lives of cancer patients here at Johns Hopkins and around the world.

Our physician-scientists are leading the way on many of the scientific breakthroughs in cancer, and your donation will support patient care and innovative research that is translated to better, more effective treatments. We are also focusing on ways to prevent cancer and support survivors.

You may designate a gift to a specific faculty member.

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