# Brooklyn College Cancer Center

Issue 6 | Summer 2025

**Dear Members of the BCCC-CURE Community,**

Welcome to the sixth edition of our Brooklyn College Cancer Center (BCCC-CURE) newsletter. In this issue, we update you on the activities and accomplishments of our BCCC-CURE faculty, staff, and student members since January 2025. We are excited to report on the accomplishments and innovative new projects of our researchers, students, educators, community outreach workers, along with our partners. We would also like to express our thanks to the American Cancer Society, the Gray Foundation, and our donors, partners, and friends for the continued support of the BCCC-CURE.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of the BCCC-CURE Newsletter. If you have any feedback or comments to make please do not hesitate to contact our team at: BCCC-CURE@brooklyn.cuny.edu

## SPRING 2025 HIGHLIGHTS

### *ACS DICRIDG PILOT GRANTS*

**Dr. Garumma Feyissa**, Assistant Professor, Health and Nutrition Sciences Department

*Unmet Needs and Coping Mechanisms: What Matters Most to African-Born Cancer Survivors?*

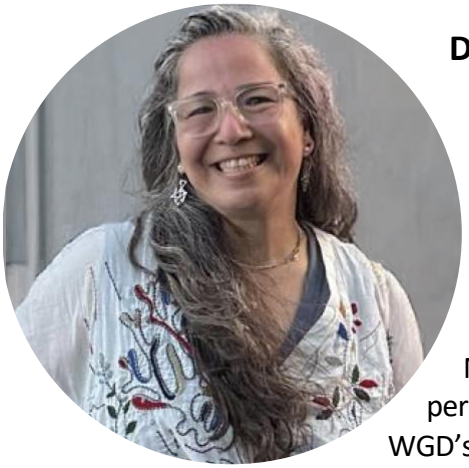
Once diagnosed with breast cancer, women face not only physical symptoms but also psychological, emotional, social, economic and financial challenges. Dr. Feyissa's project will explore the life trajectories of African-born breast cancer survivors residing in the US by drawing insights from their personal narratives and lived experiences. The project goes beyond clinical outcomes to consider how survivorship is shaped by cultural identity, immigration experiences, and structural barriers in this unique population. The project will explore challenges encountered by cancer survivors as they reintegrate themselves into society, and possible solutions that some of them have devised to tackle those challenges. By exploring the life trajectories of breast cancer survivors, the study will uncover some successful strategies used by cancer survivors to divert energy from the negative effects of the disease, to maximize their overall functioning and to support other newly diagnosed patients. The project is expected to generate evidence that lays groundwork to better understand strategies to design better pathways for patients with cancer in the entire social and healthcare system and ultimately enable breast cancer survivors to enjoy the maximum possible level of quality of life.

## *ACS DICRIDG PILOT GRANTS*

**Dr. Margrethe Horlyck-Romanovsky**, Assistant Professor, Health and Nutrition Sciences Department

*New York City Breast and Colorectal Cancer Screening Behavior by Race, Nativity, and Country of Origin: NYC CHS 2015–2019*

The project investigates how race, ethnicity, nativity, country of origin, and neighborhood impact screening and cancer incidence rates. New York City offers a unique opportunity to disaggregate data by race, place of birth, and immigration history. The project examines how social and structural factors, including access to healthcare, medical mistrust, transportation, and income, may influence cancer prevention and detection. Using five years of data from the New York City Community Health Survey, United Hospital Fund Neighborhood data, and PUMA-level cancer incidence data from the New York State Cancer Registry, the team will map geographic inequities. Cancer screening, incidence, prognosis, and mortality rates have been shown to differ significantly between US-born and international-born people by race, region of origin, ethnicity, age, and social determinants of health. This interdisciplinary study will examine such disparities and potential inequities at the population level. The project aligns with BCCC-CURE's mission to support community-based, equity-centered cancer research and community-based participatory best practice, as findings will be interpreted in partnership with a Community Advisory Board and a public town hall. The research team hopes that the project will inform culturally relevant interventions and outreach strategies aimed at increasing cancer screening rates and promoting earlier detection.



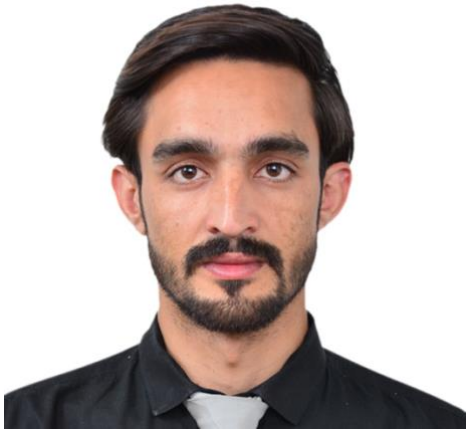
**Dr. Mara Schvarzstein**, Assistant Professor, Biology Department

*Developing Structured Condensates for Potential Anti-Cancer Drug Delivery*

Whole genome doubling (WGD) or polyploidization is a common genomic abnormality observed in approximately 30% of human cancers, including solid tumors and hematopoietic malignancies. WGD promotes chromosome instability, aneuploidy, and is permissive for other chromosomal aberrations. My lab's overarching goal has been to understand, from a mechanistic perspective, the causes and consequences of polyploidy and aneuploidy. Despite WGD's critical role in cancer, identifying the gene expression patterns regulating it has been hindered by its complexity and context dependent effects. Polyploidization and depolyploidization influence every stage of a cancer patient's experience, from tumor development, progression, treatment resistance, and recurrence. Moreover, WGD have both oncogenic and tumor-suppressive effects, depending on the cell type or tissue being studied. To overcome these difficulties my lab developed a method to rapidly generate synthetic Caenorhabditis elegans (C. elegans) tetraploid strains from diploids. Direct comparison of isogenic diploid and tetraploid animals revealed that physiological changes in tetraploids such as alterations in cell size and cell division dynamics, fitness, and stress responses, align with known effects of polyploidization in cancer. Therefore, we will use C. elegans tetraploids to identify gene expression patterns that drive and maintain polyploidization before and after treatment. Our analysis of meiotic mutant divisions indicates a link between meiotic genes, which play a role in cancer development and progression, and the regulation or maintenance of polyploidization. We will test this hypothesis by altering the expression levels of meiotic genes in both diploid and polyploid cells and organisms.

## *ACS MASTERS SCHOLARS*

*We're thrilled to celebrate our 2025 ACS Masters Scholar, who will be pursuing a fully funded master's degree in Computer Science under the mentorship of Dr. Kletenik!*



**Adil Hussain,** Computer Information Science Department

Cancer survivorship is frequently accompanied by lasting physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges that significantly impair quality of life. Common issues include fatigue, memory deficits, reduced mobility, and heightened social isolation. While rehabilitation and cognitive training programs have shown benefits, adherence remains low due to limited personalization, insufficient motivation, and accessibility barriers.

The advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI), particularly large language models (LLMs), offers a promising avenue for delivering scalable, personalized, and engaging health interventions. This research centers on the design and development of GAIN (Gamified AI Intervention), a mobile health (mHealth) application intended to improve physical activity, cognitive engagement, and social well-being among cancer survivors.

GAIN's core innovation lies in its integration of LLM-powered conversational coaching, gamified behavioral incentives, and community features, all customized to the unique needs of each user. By embedding AI within a gamified framework, GAIN seeks to enhance user motivation, promote adherence, and ultimately support better long-term health outcomes.

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## *ACS-BCCC-CURE SUMMER INTERNSHIPS FOR UNDERGRADUATE UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS*

*We congratulate our 2025 cohort of ACS-BCCC-CURE Summer Interns. We are pleased to congratulate our six Internship awardees, who in addition to receiving a $5,000 stipend to support a 10-week-long, hands on summer research experience, will also receive tailored capacity building and career readiness training and mentorship over the course of the summer.*

**Adetimilehin (Evelyn) Adeyemo** will complete research under the mentorship of Dr. Maria Contel, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department. This research is titled "Investigating the Effects of Barasertib on Aurora B Kinase and Histone H3 in Yeast ALS/FTD Models."

**Kara Duclosel** will complete research under the mentorship of Dr. Maria Contel, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department. This research is titled "Evaluation of the (Neuro)Protective Effect and Mechanism of Action of Anticancer Gold(I)-Based Compounds."

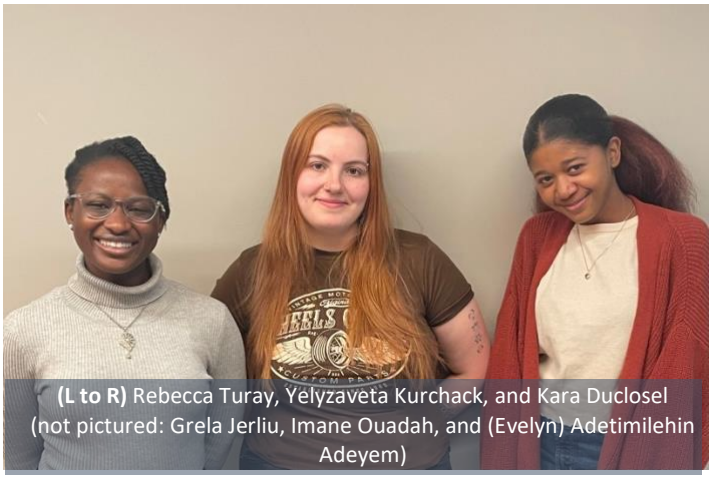
**Grela Jerliu** will complete research under the mentorship of Dr. Shaneen Singh, Biology Department. This research is titled "Computational Modeling of PARP1 Isoforms and Breast Cancer-Associated Mutations: Probing Interactions with Nucleolin and Their Role in Breast Cancer Progression."

**Yelyzaveta (Elizabeth) Kurchak** will complete research under the mentorship of Dr. Ankit Jain, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department. This research is titled "Investigating Redox Responsive Assembly Inside Coacervates for Prospective Anti-Cancer Drug Delivery."

## *ACS-BCCC-CURE SUMMER INTERNSHIPS FOR UNDERGRADUATE UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS (Continued)*

**Imane Ouadah** will complete research under the mentorship of Dr. Cheryl Carmichael, Psychology Department. This research is titled "Exploring HPV Vaccine Beliefs and Reasons for/for Not Getting the HPV Vaccine Between Individuals with an Unknown HPV Vaccination Status and Known HPV Vaccination Status."

**Rebecca Turay** will complete research under the mentorship of Dr. Maria Contel, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department. This research is titled "Development of Platinum-Gold Compounds as Potential Chemotherapeutics in Ovarian Cancer."



**(L to R)** Rebecca Turay, Yelyzaveta Kurchack, and Kara Duclosel (not pictured: Grela Jerliu, Imane Ouadah, and (Evelyn) Adetimilehin Adeyem)

## *GRAY FOUNDATION – BCCC-CURE SUMMER DOCTORAL STUDENTS RESEARCH MENTORSHIP INITIATIVE*

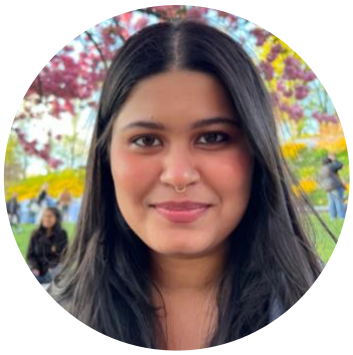
*The BCCC-CURE (via the Gray Foundation) is proud to continue our initiative to support doctoral-student led undergraduate summer opportunities in different areas of research, with one undergraduate researcher mentored by one doctoral student. Through this tiered mentorship structure, the mentoring initiative prepares undergraduates to conduct independent research in a collaborative environment, while training the Doctoral Researchers to become successful mentors.*

### Aaron Manu

Doctoral Student, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department, Brooklyn College and Biology Program, Graduate Center, CUNY

### Pasindu Wijerathne

Doctoral Student, Biology Department, Brooklyn College and Biochemistry Program, Graduate Center, CUNY



### Arefa Yeasmin

Doctoral Student, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department, Brooklyn College and Biology Program, Graduate Center, CUNY

## *GRAY FOUNDATION – BCCC-CURE SUMMER RESEARCH INTERNSHIP UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PROGRAM*

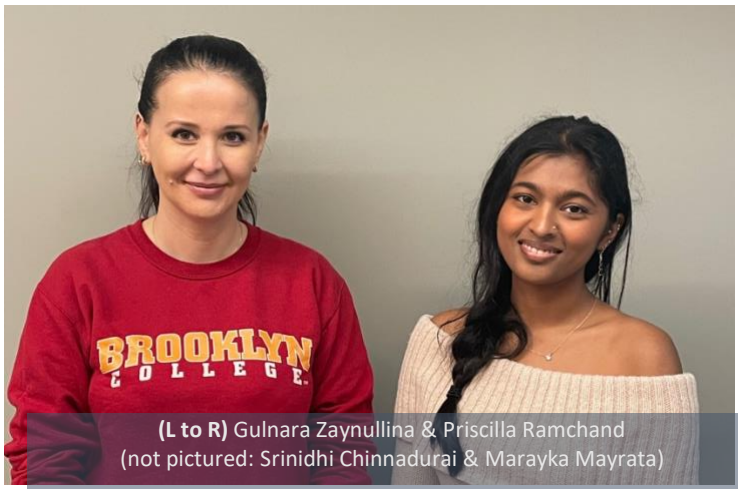
*We are pleased to congratulate our three Summer 2025 Undergraduate Research Internship awardees, who each receive a $4,000 stipend, and our one partial award recipient ($2,000), supported by the Gray Foundation to participated in 8-weeks of state-of-the-art cancer research and professional development activities with a BCCC-CURE member at Brooklyn College.*

**Srinidhi Chinnadurai** will complete research in the Regaida Lab titled "HPV Infection Perceived Concerns and Reasons for Completing and Not Starting the HPV Vaccine Series Among Young Adult Males."

**Marayke Mayrata** will complete research in the Contel Lab titled "Isolation of the Degradation Product of a Ruthenium Based Anticancer Agent."

**Priscilla Ramchand** will complete research in the Torrente Lab titled "Epigenetic Landscape of MATR3 Proteinopathy in a Yeast Model of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis."

**Gulnara Zaynullina** will complete research in the Cevher Lab titled "Defects in CTDP1-Mediator Interaction May Result in Disrupted Gene Regulation Which May Lead to Cancer."



**(L to R)** Gulnara Zaynullina & Priscilla Ramchand
(not pictured: Srinidhi Chinnadurai & Marayka Mayrata)

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## *GRAY FOUNDATION – BCCC-CURE TRAVEL AWARDS*

*Congratulations to **David Amoh Boateng, Aaron Manu, & Kathrine Menendez**, recipients of the Gray Foundation-BCCC-CURE Travel Award, which support conference attendance and research presentations in the Summer and Fall of 2025.*

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## *GRAY FOUNDATION- BCCC-CURE SUMMER RESEARCH INTERNSHIP HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENT PROGRAM*

*We are excited to announce our 2025 High School Students Research Internship cohort of high school students performing research in the laboratories of BCCC-CURE Members for Spring/Summer of 2025. This program provides a funded opportunity for upcoming 11th and 12th grade students in public High Schools in NYC to get involved in cancer-related research with a BCCC-CURE principal investigators.*

**Zuvi Quang** (Midwood High School) will complete research in the Singh Lab titled "Constructing a Full-Length 3D Model of BRCA 1."

**Simone Ware** (High School for Mathematics, Science and Engineering at City College) will complete research in the Contel Lab titled "Evaluation of the Antiproliferative Activity of Carboplatin-Basic Compounds in a Panel of Ovarian Cancer Cell Line."

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*Our researchers have published 23 cancer and health related articles, books, and book chapters through the first six months of 2025.*


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BCCC-CURE STUDENT INTERNS

*Thank you to our amazing BCCC-CURE interns and volunteers of 2024 and 2025!*


**(L to R)** Laziza Tolkunova, Eniola Adiat, Victoria Yousef, [Ana Bartolomé], Vonetta Elvis, Tre Laforce, Kiroulos Sidra

# SPRING 2025 EVENT SPOTLIGHT

## BCCC-CURE Spring 2025 Scientific Seminars and Symposia

**January 28, 2025, 12:30 – 1:30PM** BCCC-CURE Joint Seminar with Chemistry & Biochemistry Department by Dr. Clotilde Policar (Dean of the sciences education of Ecole Normale Supérieur, Deputy Director of the Laboratoire des BioMolécules) "Metal Complexes in Cells: From Bio-Activity to Bio-Imaging" hosted by Prof. Maria Contel in Room # 3143 Ingersoll.

**February 14, 2025, 12:30 – 1:30PM** BCCC-CURE Joint Seminar with Chemistry & Biochemistry Department by Dr. Alvaro Lopez-Sanchez, (Brooklyn College Cancer Center – American Cancer Society Postdoctoral Fellow, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department) "Development of Pt(IV) conjugates of oxaliplatin and redox modulators as anticancer agents with reduced neurotoxicity" hosted by Prof. Maria Contel in Room # 3143 Ingersoll.

**March 6, 2025, 12:30-1:30PM** For a Safe and Healthy World: Talk by 2024 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Ms. Masako Wada, (Assistant Secretary General, Nihon Hidankyo – The Japan Confederation of Atomic Bomb Sufferers Organizations) Event Co-hosted by: Brooklyn College Cancer Center; Center for Health Promotion of the Dept. of Health and Nutrition Sciences. Supported by: BC History Dept., Sociology Dept., Philosophy Dept. & the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities. Co-sponsored by American Cancer Society and the Gray Foundation

**March 14, 2025, 12:30 – 1:30PM** BCCC-CURE Joint Seminar with Chemistry Department by Dr. Prabodhika Mallikaratchy (Professor Department of Molecular, Cellular & Biomedical Sciences, CUNY School of Medicine) "The development of novel functional nucleic acid materials as tools to elucidate complex biological interactions" hosted by Prof. Maria Contel in Room # 3143 Ingersoll.

**March 21, 2025, 12:30 – 1:30PM** BCCC-CURE Joint Seminar with Biology Department by Dr. Joshua C. Leinwand (Assistant Professor, Department of Surgery, Division of Surgical Oncology, Icahn School of Medicine and Mount Sinai) Title: "Tissue Microbes, Immunity and Cancer", hosted by Prof. Anjana Saxena in Room # 3143 Ingersoll.

**April 4, 2025, 12:30 – 1:30PM** BCCC-CURE Joint Seminar with Dept. of Health and Nutrition Sciences by Dr. David Berrigan (Program Director, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute) Title: "Addressing Modifiable Risk Factors for Cancer Prevention and Control: Resources and Opportunities from NCI", hosted by Prof. Margrethe Horlyck-Romanovsky.

**May 8, 2025, 12:30 – 2:00PM** Friedman Lecture by Dr. Carol Carter (SUNY Distinguished Professor, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Stony Brook University Renaissance School of Medicine (RSOM) "Anti-Viral Therapeutics Targeted To Host Proteins" hosted by Prof. Ryan Murelli at the BC Library, Tanger Auditorium.

**May 15, 2025, 12:30 – 1:30PM** BCCC-CURE Joint Scientific Seminar with Chemistry & Biochemistry Department by Dr. Masaoki Kawasumi (Professor Department of Dermatology, University of Washington) "Caffeine and Epigenetics: Novel Approaches to Prevent and Treat Skin Cancer" hosted by Prof. Alexander Greer in Room # 2143 Ingersoll.

**June 5 & June 6, 2025, 9:00AM – 2:30PM** In-person training on Artificial Intelligence, with speaker Dr. Juana Mendenhall (Vice Provost of Academic Innovation & Learning, Morehouse College). The training/workshop will focus on different aspects of AI, and in addition to research uses (for different fields, the cancer title is generic due to the grant) will include pedagogy components as well. Title: "Integrating Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Cancer Research: An Interactive Training at Brooklyn College Cancer Center" hosted by Prof. Maria Contel. This training is open to all BCCC-CURE members and members of the more closely related departments (Biology, Chemistry, Psychology, Health & Nutrition Sciences).

## Community Outreach & Educational Events

**March 4th, 2025, 12:30 – 2:30PM** Staff Cancer Prevention Event Third Annual Cancer Prevention Information Session for Brooklyn College Staff: On Lung Cancer & Cervical Cancer.

**March 13th, 2025, 6:00-8:30PM** HERstory is Boundless Panel Discussion, Hosted by Women of Color Student Club Co-Sponsored by Women's Center, BC Student Activities Involvement and Leadership, and BCCC-CURE.

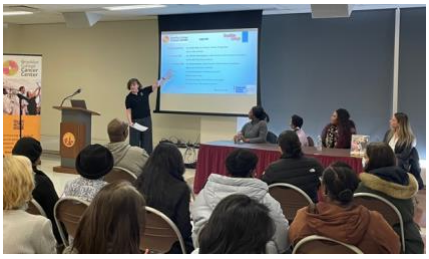
**April 29th, 2025, 11:00AM – 3:00PM** Albany's Center Advocacy Day: BC Against Cancer Team's Field Trip to Albany, lobbing for life-saving cancer care policies with American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN).

**May 1st, 2025, 12:15 – 2:15PM** in-person training on Stem Cell Donor Saliva Sample Collection by instructor: Dr. Martin Hogan (Leukemia Survivor, Director of Windsor Tough, and Emergency Surgical Dentist at Loyola University Medical Center), BCCC-CURE and the American Medical Student Association (AMSA).

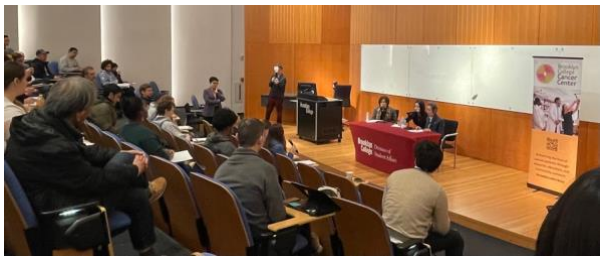
**May 6th, 2025, 12:15 – 2:15PM** BC Health and Wellness Fair – in collaboration with BC Health Programs/Immunization Office and BCCC-CURE.

**June 4th, 2025, 11:00AM – 3:00PM** D.C.'s Center Advocacy Day: BC Against Cancer Team's Field Trip to Washington D.C., lobbing for life-saving cancer care policies with HPV Cancers Alliance.








BCCC-CURE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

**Margrethe Horlyck-Romanovsky, DrPH**
Assistant Professor, Health and Nutrition Sciences Department, Brooklyn College

In 2-3 sentences can you describe your cancer research topic?

My cancer research topic is epidemiological and spatial analysis of the distribution of key cancer screening activities such as mammograms and colonoscopies and understanding the role of social and structural determinants of access. I'm also interested in examining whether there is a connection between cancer screening rates and breast and colon cancer cases by NYC neighborhood.

When and where did you start doing cancer research?

I became interested in examining breast cancer rates when the issue was raised by our Caribbean community members. So, this year will be my first year conducting formal analysis of cancer data for Brooklyn.

Briefly, what are the most rewarding and most challenging components of your cancer research career?

The most rewarding is to get to collaborate with my colleague and spatial analysis expert, Professor Philogene. The most challenging part of cancer epidemiology is to get access to detailed data.

Do you collaborate with external institutions?

We expect to collaborate with researchers from Weill Cornell and SUNY Downstate.

What do you do for fun in your free time?

I kayak on the Hudson River, Jamaica Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

**Oliatan Oladipupo, PhD**
BCCC-ACS Postdoctoral Fellow, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department, Brooklyn College, CUNY



## In 2-3 sentences can you describe your cancer research topic?

My postdoctoral research in the Contel lab is focused on developing novel platinum(IV)- gold compounds with anticancer properties against ovarian cancer. The heterometallic compounds synthesized will be characterized and evaluated for stability. The delivery and targeting properties of the new compounds will be improved by encapsulating them in liposomes and immunoliposomes. The new metallodrugs will be investigated for their cytotoxicity *in vitro* and *in vivo* against selected ovarian cancer cell lines.

## When and where did you start doing cancer research?

Cancer research for me started during my PhD. in Professor Papish lab at the university of Alabama Professor Papish lab at the university of Alabama where I synthesized, characterized, and studied the photobiology, photochemistry, and photophysics of protic Ru(II) polypyridyl compounds as potential type (II) photodynamic therapy agents.

## Briefly, what are the most rewarding and most challenging components of your cancer research career?

I have always been interested in the way chemistry transforms life, especially in medicine. So, to be part of something that potentially can provide solutions to the "emperor of all maladies" is very worthwhile to me. Cancer research being multidisciplinary has also helped me to engage in productive collaborations. I am in a new field of bioinorganic chemistry, so the research and studies keep me on my toes.

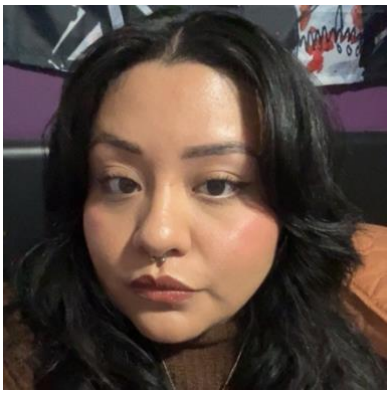
## Do you collaborate with external institutions?

I have enjoyed multidisciplinary collaborations in my past research. I believe collaboration is an essential advancement tool in science. The Contel lab where I currently work has ongoing collaborations with Dr. Jason Lewis at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK) and Dr. Swayam Prabha at the University of Washington.

## What do you do for fun in your free time?

In my free time, I spend time with my family, cook, bake, shop and listen to Juju music.

BCCC-CURE MASTERS SCHOLAR



**Joyce Escatel**
Masters Student, Psychology Department, Brooklyn College

In 1-2 sentences can you describe your cancer research topic?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common viral infection that may lead to cancer due to persistent infections that the body cannot get rid of, and the best way to protect oneself is to get vaccinated. There are currently low rates of HPV vaccination among emerging adults due to health disparities that exist. My goal is to employ an intersectional lens in exploring factors and reasons for initiating or not initiating the HPV vaccination series and to aid multiple stakeholders, including colleges, healthcare centers, and community initiatives, that aim to reduce cancer rates and health disparities among diverse emerging adults.

When did you know that you wanted to learn about cancer and start doing cancer research?

I began my cancer research career during the first semester of my Master's program at Brooklyn College. I started working with both Dr. Cheryl Carmichael and Dr. Laura Reigada on my master's thesis and have always been interested in health disparities, even as an undergraduate, which sparked my passion for cancer research and led me to choose HPV health disparities as my topic of study.

Briefly, what are the most rewarding and most challenging components of your cancer research experience with the BCCC-CURE?

The most rewarding component of my cancer research career is knowing I am contributing to the fight against cancer. It has enlightened a passion for research that I have been searching for in my undergraduate studies, and I am grateful to have found it so soon in my graduate-level research. It has also been rewarding to grow as a scientist, as my skills have developed and improved, and this growth has translated to my research and writing. The only current challenge I face in my cancer research career is the limited time I have for my overall project. I have many ideas I wish I could do all at once, but I plan to continue jotting them down for the next stage in my career!

Do you collaborate with external institutions?

I currently do not collaborate with any external institutions, but my goal is to collaborate once I advance in my career.

What do you do for fun in your free time?

During my free time, I enjoy going to the gym, crocheting, watching movies or shows, playing some Animal Crossing, and meeting up with friends to go on adventures!

# UPCOMING BCCC-CURE EVENTS

**BCCC-CURE Fall 2025 Scientific Seminars and Community Outreach & Education Events to be announced.**

## Stay Connected!

Please visit our website to find timely information about our past and upcoming educational opportunities, community outreach events, and information about becoming a BCCC-CURE member.

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