ARO 2026

TRAVEL AWARDS BROCHURE

49th Annual MidWinter Meeting

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FEBRUARY 7-11, 2026

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2026 DON HENDERSON TRAVEL AWARD RECIPIENTS

Nicholas Barad, B.S.

Nick is a third-year Ph.D. student in the Speech and Hearing Bioscience and Technology (SHBT) program at Harvard University. He earned his B.S. in Neuroscience from the University of California, Los Angeles, and is currently pursuing his doctorate under the mentorship of Dr. Albert Edge in the Eaton-Peabody Laboratories at Massachusetts Eye and Ear. His research focuses on regenerating sensorineural hearing loss, with a particular emphasis on cochlear synaptopathy and understanding the epigenetic regulation of synaptogenesis between auditory nerve fibers and inner hair cells. He aims to extend the therapeutic window for neural repair and translate his research into clinical treatments for cochlear pathology.

Sushobhan Biswas, Ph.D.

I completed my undergraduate studies in Microbiology and my Master's degree in Biochemistry at the University of Calcutta, India. During my master's research, my growing interest in neuroscience led me to pursue a Ph.D. in Biochemistry at the same institution under the mentorship of Professor Sanjit Dey. My doctoral work focused on elucidating the molecular mechanisms of neuronal death, with particular emphasis on the neurotoxic effects of smokeless tobacco. After earning my Ph.D. in August 2021, I joined Dr. Taha Jan's laboratory at the University of California, San Francisco, and later moved with the lab to Vanderbilt University Medical Center. As a postdoctoral fellow, my current research focuses on investigating the mechanisms of utricular hair cell regeneration using single-cell RNA sequencing and lineage-tracing approaches. At the upcoming ARO 2026 meeting, I will present findings on the clonal dynamics of mitotically regenerated cells following in vivo hair cell damage- a study that could help lay the groundwork for future regenerative therapies in the mammalian inner ear. My long-term goal is to establish an independent research program that investigates how hair cells regenerate in mammals following injury, with the aim of restoring hearing and balance function. By bridging fundamental discoveries with translational applications, I aspire to contribute to the development of regenerative therapies that can improve human health and quality of life.

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Khai Nguyen, Ph.D.

I am an MD/PhD student at Washington University in St. Louis in my 3rd year of medical school after having completed my PhD in Immunology. I received my bachelor's degree in Biochemistry at Earlham College in 2020. I performed my thesis research in the laboratory of Dr. Marco Colonna, where I utilized single-cell and spatial transcriptomics approaches to study inflammatory bowel diseases and central nervous system macrophages and developed a cell-based therapy for Alzheimer's disease. I currently work with Dr. Keiko Hirose to characterize immune responses in congenital CMV hearing loss. My research interests are inner ear immunity and sinonasal mucosal immunology. I plan on pursuing a career as a surgeon-scientist in Otolaryngology. In my free time, I enjoy playing tennis, visiting national parks, and trying out new restaurants.

Anu Nair, Ph.D.

I am a Texas state-licensed audiologist and a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Texas at Austin. My work focuses on understanding how subclinical auditory deficits in children, including subtle cochlear dysfunction and reduced neural fidelity, affect listening and speech perception, particularly in complex, multi-talker environments. Using behavioral and electrophysiological measures, I investigate how these early, often undetected auditory changes shape children's listening and communication abilities.

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Sevda Abdavinejad, DVM, Ph.D. Candidate

Sevda Abdavinejad is a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) and a PhD candidate in Evolution, Ecology, and Behavior at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. She works as a researcher and lab manager in the Dent Lab of Comparative Bioacoustics in the Department of Psychology. Her research focuses on the intersection of neural and communication disorders, using mouse models of Alzheimer's disease and autism spectrum disorder to investigate how neurological conditions affect hearing and vocalization. By combining behavioral hearing assessments with ultrasonic vocalization (USV) analyses, Sevda's work aims to identify sensitive preclinical biomarkers that parallel human auditory and speech impairments. Her research contributes to a growing understanding of hearing loss as a modifiable risk factor for dementia and highlights the importance of auditory and communicative function in neurological health. Originally trained as a veterinarian in Iran, Sevda brings a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective to her work in neuroscience and auditory behavior. She is passionate about mentorship, collaboration, and translational research that bridges basic science with clinical applications in otolaryngology.

Fien Aben, M.S.

Fien Aben is a doctoral researcher at Resonant Labs, University of Antwerp. Her research focuses on developing and preclinically validating RNA-based therapies for genetic hearing loss, with a particular emphasis on optimizing inner ear delivery systems using clinically translatable approaches.
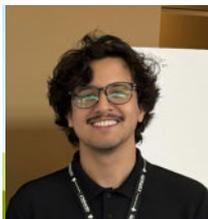
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Fernando Aguilera de Alba, B.S.

My affinity for music and bioinstrumentation led me to pursue auditory neuroscience at Purdue University (Advisor: Dr. Michael Heinz) to begin my journey to become an independent researcher. First, I joined the Heinz lab as an undergraduate (Summer 2020) and then returned as a predoctoral fellow upon graduation (Fall 2021). My research aims to understand how blast-induced traumatic brain injury (bTBI) affects the auditory system at the functional and structural level. This research is partially motivated by an ongoing project funded by the Department of Defense (DOD) investigating differences in auditory outcomes following continuous noise exposure and single blast exposure. Overall, these projects contribute to the understanding of how blast-related injuries affect the delicate auditory system, which is highly susceptible to blast trauma. My long-term objective is to develop non-invasive diagnostics of traumatic brain injury (TBI) that can be used in the field following blast exposure and other common types of neurotrauma (e.g., motor vehicle accidents and sports-related injuries).

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Jan Frederik Ahrend, M.S.

Jan Frederik Ahrend is a PhD student in auditory neuroscience at the Medical University of Innsbruck, Austria, in the laboratory of Dr. Christian Vogl. His work investigates the neural circuitry underlying the acoustic startle reflex (ASR), a rapid and evolutionarily conserved defensive behavior essential for survival. Specifically, his research focuses on large cochlear root neurons (CRNs), the earliest central auditory relays implicated in ASR generation. Despite their fundamental role, CRNs remain poorly characterized. To address this gap, he has developed novel tissue preparation and imaging strategies that preserve the cochlear root nucleus within the intact peripheral auditory pathway. Combining tissue clearing, immunohistochemistry, fiber tracing, and advanced 3D microscopy, he has provided the first holistic morphological and synaptic characterization of the complete CRN population in situ. His findings reveal evidence for distinct CRN subpopulations that may underlie functional diversity within the startle pathway. By employing multiple animal models, he also explores the evolutionary conservation of ASR mechanisms. This work has important clinical implications, as altered startle behavior is a hallmark of several neurodevelopmental and neuropsychiatric disorders, including autism spectrum disorder. Beyond his technical contributions, Jan Frederik Ahrend is committed to collaborative, curiosity-driven research and values scientific exchange within the auditory neuroscience community. As he approaches the completion of his PhD, he aims to broaden his network and pursue postdoctoral opportunities focused on functional neuroanatomy of brainstem nuclei.

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Shagun Ajmera, M.S.

Shagun is a computer science engineer by training, currently pursuing a PhD in neuroscience at the University of Illinois. Her research is focussed on understanding cognitive processes that are implicated in auditory disorders. She is presently examining how brain structure and function may be altered in individuals suffering from tinnitus, misophonia, hyperacusis, and presbycusis. To substantiate brain-behavior relationships in auditory conditions, Shagun uses brain imaging tools such as EEG and fMRI, coupled with pattern recognition methods in machine learning and artificial intelligence.

Pedro Andres Alba Diaz, M.S.

Pedro Andres Alba Diaz is a PhD student in Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at The University of Texas at Austin, where he is part of the Children's Auditory Research and Education (CARE) Lab. His work centers on auditory signal processing and computational modeling to better understand how the brain encodes complex sounds. Pedro employs time-frequency analysis and machine learning techniques to study auditory neural responses, aiming to advance hearing diagnostics and auditory technologies. Originally from Mexico, Pedro earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Biomedical Engineering from the University of Guanajuato. He then completed a Master of Science in Biomedical Engineering at the Technische Hochschule Lübeck and the Universität zu Lübeck in Germany. During his graduate studies, he collaborated on projects involving cochlear implant modeling and EEG-based decoding of auditory attention. Outside of academia, Pedro enjoys traveling, exploring new cultures, and spending time with friends and family.

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Larisa Antonellis, B.S.

I am a post-baccalaureate research assistant in Dr. David Corey's laboratory at Harvard Medical School, where I study the inner ear and investigate the genetic causes of hereditary hearing loss. Over the past three years, my research has focused on the GJB2 gene, examining the effects of common mutations and exploring gene therapy approaches as potential treatment options. This year will be my fourth time attending the ARO MidWinter Meeting, where I will present our recent findings on GJB2 expression in the cochlea. I am deeply honored to receive this travel award, which will support my participation in the meeting and provide valuable opportunities to share my work, learn from leaders in the field, and advance my research interests. I am applying to graduate school with an interest in exploring how the neural pathways for speech and language development reorganize when auditory information is absent, and whether neural function can be reactivated beyond the critical periods of development. I am grateful for this opportunity and looking forward to engaging with the ARO community once again.

Megan Arnold, B.S.

Megan Arnold is an MD/PhD trainee in the Medical Scientist Training Program at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University, pursuing her PhD in auditory neuroscience. She works under the mentorship of Dr. Aravind Parthasarathy and Dr. Greg Basura, studying neural plasticity in single-sided deafness (SSD). Her research integrates animal electrophysiology, human EEG and fNIRS, and molecular assays to understand how the brain adapts to asymmetric hearing loss and how these changes influence speech perception and listening effort. Megan's long-term goal is to become an academic neurotologist-scientist leading a translational research program that bridges basic auditory neuroscience with clinical care to improve hearing-restoration outcomes. In addition to her research, Megan serves as the Outreach Coordinator for Project SHORT (Students for Higher-Ed Opportunities and Representation in Training), a national organization that provides free mentorship for applicants from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds pursuing MD, PhD, and MD/PhD programs. She is passionate about promoting equity, accessibility, and disability inclusion in science and medicine.
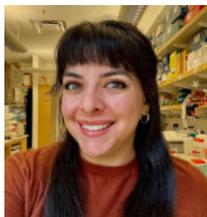
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Selina Baeza-Loya, Ph.D.

Selina Baeza-Loya, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Washington in the laboratory of Dr. David W Raible. She specializes in vestibular function and physiology and is passionate about harnessing the zebrafish as a model organism to investigate the inner ear. Over the past ten years, she has developed expertise in vestibular hair cells and primary neurons. Her approaches center on genetic tools to solve complex challenges in developmental and regenerative dynamics of the inner ear. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, she utilized a dual approach of electrophysiology and computational modeling to investigate the role of multiple sodium currents in vestibular neuron excitability. She was awarded a prestigious HHMI Gilliam Fellowship for Advanced Study. Currently, she is pioneering novel transgenic animals to investigate the development, death, and regeneration of peripheral vestibular circuitry. She is looking forward to sharing her latest discoveries and reconnecting with her colleagues at ARO 2026.

James Baldassano, Ph.D.

I first completed my B.S. in Biology/Ecology in 2016 at Binghamton University before becoming a research technician in Dr. Patricia DiLorenzo's gustatory behavioral electrophysiology lab, studying taste-evoked responses in the nucleus of the solitary tract. Continuing in brainstem electrophysiology, I completed my Ph.D. in 2018 at the University of Maryland under the direction of Dr. Katrina MacLeod and Dr. Catherine Carr, studying neuroanatomy and the intrinsic physiology of neurons in the auditory brainstem circuits of chickens, primarily in the cochlear nucleus angularis and the superior olivary nucleus. Currently, I am a postdoc at the NIH working in the lab of Dr. Catherine Weisz. Here, I am using patch clamp electrophysiology to explore the physiology of neurons in the small cell cap of the cochlear nucleus, as well as classifying potassium conductances in medial olivocochlear neurons. When I'm not in the lab, I enjoy playing piano in a number of local bands (using ear protection of course).

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Kira Boyce, B.A.

I am a third-year PhD candidate in Xiaowei Lu's lab at the University of Virginia. I am a first generation college student who is deeply passionate about making science more accessible for the communities that shaped me. I grew up in an area where opportunities for higher education were rare, and I witnessed firsthand how barriers to scientific understanding can limit both opportunities and representation for individuals. These experiences have helped to supply my commitment not only to scientific discovery, but also to communicating science in ways that bridge the academic and public spheres. I currently serve on the UVA Biology Graduate Student Council and regularly participate in outreach events hosted by the department, which fuels my commitment to this aspect of my doctoral training. My research focuses on how cells coordinate mechanical forces and planar cell polarity cues to organize tissues during development. Specifically, I study the pseudo-receptor tyrosine kinase Ptk7 and the scaffold protein Afadin, two molecules that work together to regulate the balance between cell polarity and actomyosin contractility in the developing inner ear. I use mouse models and ex vivo assays to investigate how these proteins help cells generate and transmit mechanical tension to align hair cells through development. By uncovering how Ptk7 and Afadin link cytoskeletal and cellular polarity networks, my work aims to reveal the molecular basis of normal inner ear formation, and how its disruption can contribute to congenital disorders, such as hereditary deafness.

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Karen Castaño González, M.S.

I am a PhD candidate in the University Medical Center Groningen's ENT Department, where I investigate the role of cellular senescence in age-related hearing loss under the supervision of Dr. Sonja Pyott. Originally from Mexico, my journey into hearing research began during my Master's studies, when I became fascinated by the complexity of the auditory system and the mechanisms driving the differentiation of auditory precursor cells. As a Technologist, I was trained to bridge basic and applied sciences, gaining early experience across diverse research areas — from testing the effects of coffee on dental prosthetics to exploring innovative gene delivery techniques. This curiosity and versatility continue to shape my approach to hearing research today. Supported by a scholarship from the Mexican government, my doctoral work explores cochlear aging and hearing decline across multiple animal models, including the remarkable naked mole rat. Beyond the lab, I enjoy exploring new cultures, cooking, dog training, and discovering live music! Attending the ARO MidWinter Meeting will give me the opportunity to present my findings at one of the most influential gatherings in auditory science.

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Minzi Chang, Ph.D.

My passion for neuroscience was sparked by early experiences working with children with neurodevelopment disorders (ASD and ADHD). After earning a bachelor's degree in microbiology in Malaysia, I pursued a master's and Ph.D. in Neuroscience in Japan, followed by postdoctoral training with Prof. Patrick Kanold at the University of Maryland, College Park, in the United States. Despite challenges posed by the pandemic and the subsequent relocation of our lab to Johns Hopkins University, I maintained research productivity by contributing to the establishment of the new lab infrastructure, coordinating animal protocol submissions, developing new collaborations, and contributing to both review and research manuscripts. My multidisciplinary training and experience across different laboratories have equipped me with the skills to pursue my passion for understanding how neural circuits form during development. Currently, my research focuses on the developing auditory cortex, particularly thalamocortical circuits, whose early organization across first- and higher-order pathways is still poorly understood. Using a mouse model, I aim to map the anatomical development of the auditory thalamocortical system during the embryonic period and investigate synaptic connections between distinct thalamocortical axons and their target cortical neurons in early postnatal development. I hope to apply these insights to disease models such as congenital deafness, ASD, and schizophrenia. I am actively on the job market, seeking a tenure-track faculty position to establish an independent research program.

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Ahsan Cheema, M.S., B.S.

Ahsan J. Cheema is a PhD candidate in Speech and Hearing Bioscience and Technology (SHBT) at Harvard University, conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Sunil Puria. His current work leverages machine-learning and engineering methods to develop task-optimized models of auditory perception and to design individualized hearing-aid fitting strategies. Trained as a mechanical engineer, Ahsan holds BS and an MS in Mechanical Engineering. His work experience spans from software product development to the petrochemical industry. He became interested in hearing and acoustics while working as a machinery diagnostics engineer, where he used acoustics and vibration analysis to predict machine failures. In the past, he has received several awards, including the Fulbright Scholarship for his master's study and the Best Student Paper Award at the 2024 Voice Foundation Annual Symposium. Outside the lab, he enjoys reading philosophy, cycling, and working out.

Yunru Chen, M.S.

I am a fifth-year Ph.D. candidate in Biomedical Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, co-advised by Prof. Patrick Kanold and Prof. Justus Kebschull. I received my B.S. in Biological Engineering from Purdue University and completed my master's thesis in Biomedical Engineering at Johns Hopkins University under the supervision of Prof. Nitish Thakor. My doctoral research focuses on understanding how the brain encodes harmonic sounds that form the foundation of music and speech, and how these cortical representations change with aging. Using in vivo calcium imaging combined with computational analyses, I study how auditory cortical networks at different ages encode and represent diverse harmonic structures. This work aims to reveal how neural circuits integrate acoustic information across frequencies and how these processes evolve over the lifespan. In addition, my dissertation explores the neurodevelopment of cerebellocortical circuits and their roles in sensory processing. I actively collaborate on projects involving electrophysiological recordings and spatial transcriptomics to link neural activity with molecular and circuit-level organization during development. My long-term goal is to elucidate how neural circuits in the cerebral cortex mature to encode complex sensory information and to understand how disruptions to these developmental processes may contribute to neurodevelopmental disorders.

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Feifan Chen, Ph.D.

I am a postdoctoral fellow in Dr. Ross Maddox's lab at the Kresge Hearing Research Institute, University of Michigan. My research focuses on how the human auditory system encodes sounds in complex acoustic environments, with an emphasis on linking auditory-nerve physiology to perceptual outcomes. Using EEG, electrocochleography, and computational modeling, I aim to develop more precise methods to capture fiber-specific neural responses in humans. My current project introduces a forward-masking paradigm designed to separate auditory nerve fibers with different spontaneous rates, offering new insights into the mechanisms of hidden hearing loss and cochlear synaptopathy. Before joining Michigan, I completed my Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology at Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Prof. Sven Vanneste, where I studied auditory phantom perception and predictive coding. I also hold an M.Sc. in Audiology from Cardiff Metropolitan University and a B.S. in Audiology and Speech Rehabilitation from Zhejiang Chinese Medical University. Broadly, my goal is to bridge auditory neuroscience and clinical audiology by developing objective biomarkers that link neural encoding to hearing outcomes. I'm excited to share my work at ARO and connect with other researchers studying how the brain makes sense of sound.

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Tracy Cheng, M.D., MHS

I am a second year neurotology fellow at Stanford University currently in a three year clinician scientist research fellowship. I have been involved in research since my undergraduate studies, where I was elected to Sigma Xi for my senior thesis on the role of endoplasmic reticulum secretory proteins in Drosophila melanogaster oocyte determination. I further pursued my interest in research by obtaining a master's degree in Health Sciences during medical school. The program provided the background to critically analyze current literature as the foundation for new hypotheses and questions. It also inspired an interest in translational research to advance clinical understanding and solve clinical problems. In medical school, I worked closely with the Duke University Department of Otolaryngology on multiple research projects such as outcomes of sinus surgery in patients with cystic fibrosis and computational models of upper airway airflow. These projects resulted in multiple publications and piqued my interest in biomedical research. In residency, I have become drawn to research in causes and treatments for hearing loss, and I was awarded a CORE Resident Research Grant to investigate the role of Tomt in hearing loss and gene therapy in the treatment of sensorineural hearing loss caused by Tomt deficiency.

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Daniela Chequer Charan, M.S.

My name is Daniela Chequer Charan and as a final-year Ph.D. student at INGEBI-CONICET in Argentina, I am eager to share the findings of my thesis work on the role of the medial olivocochlear efferent system in auditory brainstem maturation. My research aims to understand how alterations in auditory peripheral modulation affect the development and function of central neuronal circuits. During early postnatal stages, spontaneous cochlear activity—regulated by the medial olivocochlear (MOC) efferent pathway—drives the refinement of auditory brainstem networks, including the synapses between the calyx of Held (CH) and the principal neurons from de medial nucleus of the trapezoid body (MNTB). Dysregulation of this process alters synaptic properties with implications for neurological development. Through electrophysiology experiments, I study synaptic transmission and perform morphological analysis to detect changes in the CH using mouse models lacking (α9KO) or with enhanced efferent MOC activity (α9KI). My work combines whole-cell electrophysiology, 3D electron microscopy and custom computational pipelines for morphological analysis. In parallel, I have carried out large-scale morphological analyses of the CH - MNTB synapse at different stages of the animal's life in which I studied aging-related changes using segmented serial microscopy images (Chequer Charan et al., 2022).

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Conner Corbett, B.S.

Conner Corbett is a Senior Clinical Research Assistant at Oregon Health and Science University, where he works under the supervision of Dr. Erick Gallun and Dr. Tess Koerner, coordinating human-subject research that explores cognition, and hearing perception. He is passionate about understanding how the brain processes new information—especially how aging, hearing loss, and traumatic brain injury affect auditory perception. Recently, he has begun training in electroencephalography (EEG), using it to examine passive and active brain responses to auditory input. Before this, he interned in Dr. Matt Lattal's lab, contributing to research on memory extinction using HDAC inhibitors in the nucleus accumbens—supporting behavioral conditioning, brain slicing, and observing intracranial injections. His earlier career as an ABA therapist also shaped his interest in the connection between behavior and brain systems. He is currently preparing to apply to PhD programs in Behavioral and Systems Neuroscience, with a focus on learning and memory. Long term, he aims to contribute to translational neuroscience by linking lab-based research with real-world cognitive and clinical challenges.

Jason Cote, Ph.D.

I am a neuroscientist with eight years of research experience spanning molecular, physiological, and behavioral approaches to understanding sensory processing. My doctoral work at Florida State University examined the neural and behavioral consequences of high-strength magnetic field exposure, with a focus on vestibular system involvement. As a postdoctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, I am investigating cholinergic modulation of type II vestibular hair cells (HC-II), combining whole-cell patch-clamp electrophysiology with genetic models to dissect the role of muscarinic acetylcholine receptors (mAChRs) and BK channels in shaping efferent modulation of vestibular processing.

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Eric Cunningham, B.A.

Medical student at New York Medical College and aspiring otolaryngologist with research interests in cochlear implantation, acoustic neuromas and hearing loss. Currently on a research fellowship year with Rick Friedman, MD, PhD at UC San Diego.

Claire Dorey, Au.D.

Claire M. Dorey, Au.D. is a fourth year Ph.D. student at the University of South Florida in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders mentored by Erol Ozmeral, Ph.D. and Robert Frisina, Ph.D. She earned her Au.D. from the University of Florida in 2022. Her research interests are primarily in translational hearing research using animal models and human psychophysics. She is interested in developing a bench to bedside research program in the future.

Audrey Drotos, Ph.D.

Dr. Audrey Drotos (she/her) received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in Michael Roberts' lab, where she studied how the inferior colliculus encodes complex sounds using patch-clamp electrophysiology and machine learning. Currently, she is a postdoctoral fellow in Dr. Maria Geffen's lab where she studies how the thalamic reticular nucleus highlights behaviorally relevant sounds in the thalamocortical pathway using in vivo electrophysiology. Outside of the lab, she leads a nonprofit called Your Neighborhood Scientist that seeks to build relationships between scientists and the communities they serve.

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Kimia Feiz, M.S. Student

Kimia Feiz is a Master of Science student in Biology at Texas State University, working under the supervision of Professor Dana García. Her research focuses on developmental neurobiology, specifically the inner ear of salamanders. By combining immunohistochemistry, confocal microscopy, and RNA sequencing, she investigates how proteins such as PAX6 and Myosin VIIA contribute to hair-cell differentiation across developmental stages and species. Her work has been recognized with multiple honors, including the Dorothy Coker Research Fellowship and the P.E.O. International Peace Scholarship. She has also shared her findings through conference presentations and outreach, earning the People's Choice Award at Texas State's Three Minute Thesis competition. Kimia is excited to attend the 2026 MidWinter Meeting of the Association for Research in Otolaryngology in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to present her research, connect with experts in auditory and vestibular biology, and gain insights that will guide her future Ph.D. studies in neurobiology.
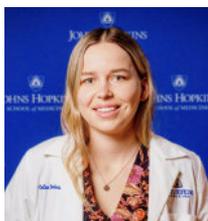
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Celia Fernandez Brillet, M.S.

Celia Fernandez Brillet is a sixth-year PhD candidate in Biomedical Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, working in the Vestibular NeuroEngineering Laboratory. Her research aims to restore peripheral vestibular sensation through electrical neuromodulation. In the lab, Celia covers several stages of the translational process—from designing and testing new technologies on the bench to studying their effects in rodent models and evaluating existing paradigms in human studies. She is passionate about using engineering to improve patients' quality of life, mentoring students to develop practical engineering skills, and community outreach. Outside the lab, Celia loves exploring different cultures and languages and is an avid dog trainer with a passion for dog agility.

Kiran Ganga, B.S.

Kiran Ganga is a second-year medical student at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth with a strong interest in otolaryngology. She is actively involved in student leadership and medical education, serving as President of the South Asian Medical Student Association (SAMSA), a medical education representative for her class, and a student leader for both the ENT Interest Group and the Medical Education Scholars Interest Group. Kiran's research focuses on hyperbaric oxygen therapy and other innovation interventions in otolaryngology. She is passionate about improving access to care, advancing medical education, and fostering diversity and representation within the medical community.

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Franz Gareza, B.S.

Franz is a post-baccalaureate trainee at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Prior to this, he earned his undergraduate degree in Biology—Biomed track at the University of Guam (UOG) and previously worked in healthcare as a patient-care dialysis technician. He is currently working under Dr. Lisa Cunningham at the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), where he investigates potential therapeutics that may reduce or minimize the severity of hearing loss caused by the widely used ototoxic anti-cancer drug cisplatin. In collaboration with Dr. Cathy Sung, he has contributed to early investigations of molecular mechanisms that may influence the permeability of the blood-labyrinth barrier following cisplatin treatment. His work in the lab has fostered a deep appreciation for research, and the supportive environment has shaped his growth as a scientist. Attendance at scientific conferences such as ARO has nurtured his interest in immunology and its implications in neurodegeneration. As an aspiring physician with strong research interests, he looks forward to meaningful engagement with the community and exploring new scientific innovations and advancements at the 49th Annual MidWinter Meeting of ARO.

Zahra Ghasemahmad, Ph.D.

Dr. Zahra Ghasemahmad is a postdoctoral fellow in auditory neuroscience with Dr. Anne Takesian at Mass Eye and Ear and Harvard Medical School. She earned her Ph.D. with Dr. Jeffrey Wenstrup at Northeast Ohio Medical University, where she investigated the neuromodulation of vocal communication processing in the amygdala. Prior to her doctoral studies, she worked for several years as a clinical audiologist. Her current research focuses on understanding the brain circuits that integrate sensory and motor outputs in response to salient vocalizations. Her long-term goal is to bridge her clinical expertise with basic neuroscience research to address key questions related to sensory–motor coordination in individuals with auditory or communication deficits.
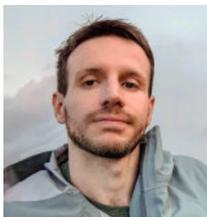
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Francesco Gianoli, Ph.D.

Francesco Gianoli grew up in a 200-resident village in the Italian Alps and earned a degree in Physics from the University of Turin. While many classmates pursued particle physics, he applied physics to violin making: working with master luthier Gianfranco Dindo, he devised a quantitative, physics-based method to guide the construction of a violin bridge. He then completed a Master's in Physics of Complex Systems at the Politecnico di Torino and a Master's in Fundamental Physics at Université Paris-Saclay and the École normale supérieure de Cachan, writing his thesis on stochastic equations to forecast financial crises. A brief interval in quantitative finance confirmed that the systems he wanted to understand were biological. During his PhD in Bioengineering at Imperial College London he addressed the long-standing "gating-swing" paradox in auditory mechanotransduction, showing that lipid–protein coupling between paired transduction channels can provide the mechanical compliance required for hair cells to amplify stimuli without invoking unrealistically large conformational changes. He then moved from modeling to instrumentation, working on a photonic-pressure technique that can drive hair bundles at kilohertz rates, enabling experiments at the native speeds of mammalian hearing. In 2021 he joined A. James Hudspeth's laboratory at The Rockefeller University, first as an F. M. Kirby Postdoctoral Fellow and now as a Kavli Neural Systems Institute Fellow. There he developed a lifelike bio-chamber that preserves the cochlea's active process ex vivo and showed that cochlear amplification can emerge from local critical behavior. In 2025 he was awarded a European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant to establish his independent laboratory on the biophysics of hearing.
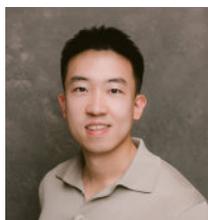
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Zixu Guo, B.S.

My name is Zach Zixu Guo. I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Neuroscience Graduate Program at The Ohio State University, where I study how immune signaling contributes to hearing loss in the lab of Dr. Ruili Xie. My research focuses on the role of complement protein C3 and cochlear macrophages in mediating tissue damage and recovery following noise trauma and age-related hearing loss. I am also interested in how neuroinflammation affects the morphological and physiological changes of bushy cells and bushy cell synapses in the cochlear nucleus after noise trauma. Before graduate school, I earned my B.S. in Neuroscience with a minor in Biochemistry from The College of William & Mary. I've presented my work at conferences such as the Association for Research in Otolaryngology and the Midwest Auditory Research Conference. I am currently working on several manuscripts to be submitted in the following year.
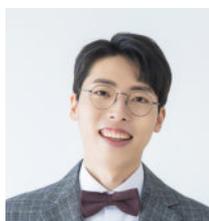
Jusung Ham, M.S.

Jusung Ham is a PhD candidate in Speech and Hearing Science at the University of Iowa. Working in the Human Auditory Neuroscience Lab under the guidance of Dr. Inyong Choi, his research focuses on understanding and improving central auditory processing to enhance hearing in noisy environments. His dissertation project aims to explore neurocognitive mechanisms that link attention and speech perception in noise by using auditory attention training combined with EEG-based auditory brain-computer interfaces. Jusung Ham is attending the conference to present his latest research on this topic and is currently seeking a postdoctoral position to advance this translational work.

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Robert Hart, M.S.

I am a PhD student specializing in auditory science within the Auditory Prosthesis Group at the Medical School Hannover, Germany. I obtained my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Computer Engineering at Leibniz Universität Hannover, with a strong background in acoustics and audio signal processing. Following this interest, my research aims to understand the interaction between electrical and acoustic stimulation and explore extracochlear electrical stimulation as a less invasive alternative for hearing restoration in individuals with severe hearing loss and residual hearing. In my recent work, I investigated the possibilities of evoking hearing sensations through electrodes temporarily placed in the ear canal while also characterizing their limitations. Moreover, I developed a deep-learning based sound coding strategy that transforms audio signals into the electrical patterns used by cochlear implants while simultaneously performing speech enhancement. By deepening the understanding of how extracochlear electrical and acoustic stimulation interact and by finding optimal speech encodings, I aim to contribute to the development of a novel hearing aid that combines the advantages of both approaches, enhancing hearing outcomes without the risks associated with surgical procedures.

Maya Hatley, B.A.

Maya Hatley is a medical student at the NYU Grossman School of Medicine pursuing a career in otolaryngology–head and neck surgery. She recently completed a dedicated research year with the NYU Department of Otolaryngology, where she worked closely with the Cochlear Implant Center on clinical and translational projects in auditory science. Her clinical research focuses on functional outcomes and quality of life following surgical intervention, particularly in patients with hearing loss. She is now applying to otolaryngology residency. Maya has presented her research at national and international meetings, including the American Academy of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery, the American Neurotology Society, and the Association for Research in Otolaryngology. Dedicated to combining research with patient care, Maya aims to pursue an academic career as a clinician-scientist focused on improving surgical and rehabilitative outcomes for patients with complex otolaryngologic disorders.

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Charles Hem, B.S.

Charles Hem is in the 6th year of his PhD in Harvard's Speech and Hearing Bioscience and Technology program, completing his dissertation on cochlear implants in Dr. Julie Arenberg's lab. Charles uses a cochlear implant himself and entered his PhD after completing his biomedical engineering undergraduate degree at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Charles' research focuses on assessment of channel interaction in cochlear implants through behavioral and physiological measures in human participants. These assessments are then used to create experimental programs to aid in speech-in-noise performance and music listening. Charles aims to use his own experience as a cochlear implant user to guide his research down meaningful paths to improve hearing outcomes for other implant users.

Isabel Herb, Au.D.

JIsabel Herb, Au.D. is a clinical audiologist and Ph.D. student in the Department of Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences at the University of Minnesota, mentored by Dr. Melissa Polonenko. After completing her doctorate, she aims to establish a research program that bridges clinical audiology and auditory neuroscience, focusing on how the human brain encodes and processes sound from the brainstem to the cortex. Her primary interests include auditory development, electrophysiology, and the neural mechanisms that support hearing and communication across the lifespan. Outside of research, Isabel is passionate about mentorship, scientific communication, and fostering an inclusive research environment. She plans to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship and ultimately a faculty position where she can lead a collaborative laboratory dedicated to understanding auditory system function and translating that knowledge into better hearing healthcare outcomes.

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Rachel Honeyghan-Williams, Ph.D.

Like many Londoners, I was born on one of King's College London's hospital campuses. As such, it was only natural that I returned there to complete my scientific training on home turf. In 2015, I obtained my BSc in Neuroscience alongside a King's Undergraduate Research Fellowship under the supervision of Clemens Kiecker. This project, exploring forebrain patterning after embryonic alcohol exposure in chick, sparked my curiosity regarding the maturation of neurobiological systems. In 2023, I completed my MRes/PhD in Developmental Neurobiology in the same department, jointly supervised by Martin Meyer and Matt Grubb. My thesis explored how larval zebrafish generate appropriate behavioural responses to visual stimuli, first by labelling individual neurons and secondly by recording videos of real-time activity from across the whole brain. I loved working with big data from hundreds of thousands of cells and using my coding skills to dive into sensory neuroscience. Luckily for me, that's exactly what I've been doing in my current position as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Lipovsek lab at the UCL Ear Institute. I'm excited to present our transcriptomic atlas of the mouse utricle, consisting of single nucleus RNA sequencing data from 120 000 cells spanning embryonic to adult stages, at this year's MidWinter Meeting. Finally, I am a keen science communicator having worked with the BBC, the Royal Institution, and science festivals across the UK. In March 2025, I became a trustee of the British Science Association which works to create better access to science across society.

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Md Fahad Hossain, MBBS

Md Fahad Hossain is a scientist in training with a strong commitment to advancing translational hearing research. He completed his MBBS degree and all three steps of the USMLE, and is currently a fully funded master's student in Translational Biomedicine at the University of Iowa, where he also serves as a postdoctoral scholar in Claussen Lab. His research focuses on understanding hearing changes following cochlear implantation, integrating molecular, imaging, and computational approaches to improve long-term auditory outcomes in patients. Fahad has published multiple peer-reviewed articles, and his work has been cited over many times. He has presented his findings at multiple national and international scientific meetings, including the Association for Research in Otolaryngology. His long-term goal is to become a surgeon-scientist, leading a translational research program that bridges laboratory discovery with clinical innovation to improve patient outcomes in hearing restoration. Receiving the ARO Travel Grant recognizes Fahad's contributions to auditory neuroscience and his potential as a future leader in the field. He is passionate about mentorship, collaboration, and advancing scientific approaches that improve the quality of life for individuals with hearing loss.

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Corey Howard, DVM, Ph.D.

Dr. Cory M. Howard is a Veterinary Anatomic and Toxicologic Pathology Resident at the Michigan State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (East Lansing, MI) and Charles River Laboratories (Mattawan, MI). Born and raised a Buckeye, Cory began his scientific journey at The Ohio State University in the Center for Retrovirus Research. He earned his Ph.D. in Biomedical Sciences from the University of Toledo College of Medicine and Life Sciences, where his dissertation examined how chemokine receptor signaling intersects with the protein translational machinery in triple-negative breast cancer. Following graduate school, Cory completed his DVM at Michigan State University and later entered a unique joint residency in anatomic and toxicologic pathology between Michigan State University and Charles River Laboratories. His current residency project focuses on the middle and inner ear, characterizing spontaneous background and administration-related histopathologic findings across multiple preclinical animal models. Cory is deeply grateful for the mentorship of Dr. Mee Ja Sula, a veterinary otopathologist at Charles River Laboratories. He is extremely thankful for the support of the Association for Research in Otolaryngology and for the opportunity to learn from and contribute to this wonderful community.

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Yao-Hsin Huang, B.S.

I am a master's student in Life Science at National Taiwan University and will transition to a Ph.D. program next spring. My research focuses on the auditory brainstem, aiming to establish an in vivo single-cell transfection method combined with simultaneous patch-clamp recording in the mouse cochlear nucleus. I am honored to be selected for the Travel Award for my first attendance at the ARO MidWinter Meeting, and I am excited to share my findings with the community. Through this opportunity, I also hope to broaden my understanding of the auditory system and receive insightful feedback from ARO experts. My curiosity drives me to explore how the brain extracts meaning from sound. After the cochlear nucleus encodes acoustic information, how is this representation transformed along the auditory pathway to support perception and vocalization? For instance, octopus cells perform sequence detection of rapid inputs—how does such temporal coding contribute to recognizing and producing complex vocalizations, and why is this function essential for communication? I am also intrigued by how neurons in the cochlear nucleus connect and how these connections shape responses to acoustic stimuli. These are the questions I hope to gain new insights into through discussions with researchers at the ARO MidWinter Meeting, which I believe will greatly help me refine my project and guide future directions.

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Ella Jackert, B.S.

Ella Prebel Jackert is a clinical researcher and trainee with the USC Caruso Department of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery. Her research focuses on improving outcomes for patients with head and neck cancer, particularly those with HPV-associated disease. Her work integrates clinical effectiveness, population-level analytics, and translational science to better understand how treatment decisions influence postoperative recovery, functional results, and long-term survivorship.

Namitha Jain, MSc Audiology

Namitha Jain is a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the Auditory Cognitive Neuroscience Lab at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, mentored by Dr. Fatima T Husain. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology and a Master's degree in Audiology from the All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, India. Her research investigates how the brain links sound and emotion in both typical and disordered hearing, using behavioral and neuroimaging methods (fMRI and EEG). Her doctoral work focuses on misophonia, a condition where everyday sounds trigger disproportionately intense emotional responses. She aims to uncover its neural and behavioral mechanisms and inform objective diagnostic and intervention strategies. Through this work, she will contribute to the emerging field of affective neuroscience in hearing sciences, bridging mechanistic neuroscience and clinical audiology. Namitha has presented her research at national and international conferences and received recognition and travel awards from multiple professional organizations. She is also a recipient of the prestigious Empowering Students Scholarship from the American Academy of Audiology.

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Ashwin Jhawer, B.S.

Ashwin Jhawer is a third-year medical student at Dell Medical School at The University of Texas at Austin, currently completing a research year in the Otopathology Laboratory at Massachusetts Eye and Ear. Originally from Houston, Texas, Ashwin earned his Bachelor of Science in Public Health at UT Austin, where he began performing basic science research on acute liver failure. Prior to medical school, he worked as a medical assistant and scribe in an ENT clinic, which sparked and propelled his interest in otolaryngology. Ashwin's interests center on identifying novel therapeutic targets in order to improve outcomes for patients with chronic medical conditions. Under the mentorship of Dr. Divya Chari, his current research focuses on investigating the pathophysiologic mechanisms of Meniere's disease through translational approaches. Ashwin aspires to become an academic clinician-scientist and advance translational research in the field of otolaryngology throughout his career. In his free time, Ashwin enjoys playing the ukulele, reading science fiction, and cheering for college football.

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Rosemay Kabahuma, MMed, Ph.D.

Dr Rosemary Ida Kabahuma is a Clinician Scientist (Otorhinolaryngologist, Head and Neck surgeon) with special interest in hearing loss and cochlear function. Through the Genomic Deafness Research Project, Dr Kabahuma has focused on building a repository of deafness genes prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa. Her current research – The characterization of deafness genes in an indigenous African population in the Limpopo Province of South Africa – will contribute to updated diagnostic protocols and management strategies for hearing loss, as well as raise the quality of healthcare in the management of genetic deafness among individuals of sub-Saharan African descent. The penultimate goal is to use the research findings in designing a personalized treatment approach for affected individuals in order to enable them become empowered, fully integrated, productive members of society. Dr Kabahuma is the 2023-2024 Helen Putnam Harvard Radcliffe Fellow, a Fullbright alumni 2018-2019 and a member of the Association of Research in Otolaryngology. She is currently affiliated to the University of Pretoria. Dr Kabahuma holds an MBCHB (Makerere University), an MMed in Otorhinolaryngology (University of Nairobi), an MSc in Audiological Medicine (UCL, University of London), and a PHD (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg). Her work has attracted funding from the Mellon Foundation, the South African Medical Research Council, and through her US collaborators, the National Institutes of Health. She has worked extensively in public hospitals providing medical care to underserviced communities. She has published impactful research, with 282 citations to date.

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Anna Kamau, B.S.

Anna Frazier Kamau is a third-year Ph.D. student in the Speech and Hearing Bioscience and Technology program at Harvard University. As a member of Dr. Heidi Nakajima's Ear Mechanics Laboratory at Mass Eye and Ear, Anna works on improving diagnostic methods for middle- and inner-ear diseases. Her research explores how we can integrate wideband tympanometry, mechanical modeling of the ear, and machine learning to improve diagnostic accuracy at the point of initial assessment. Anna earned her B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Johns Hopkins University. Prior to starting her Ph.D., Anna worked as an engineer at Creare, where her projects in hearing and acoustic technologies inspired her to pursue hearing science research. Beyond the lab, Anna is passionate about mentorship and outreach. As a first-generation college graduate, she is grateful for the guidance that shaped her own path and is committed to supporting students from similar backgrounds. Through her research and mentorship, she aims to promote greater accessibility and equity in hearing healthcare.

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Lore Kerkhofs, MSc. Aud

After graduating with an MSc in Audiology from KU Leuven, I began my doctoral training in the lab of Prof. Nicolas Verhaert, and was funded by the Flemish Research Foundation. Fascinated by the anatomy of the inner ear, I developed expertise in imaging techniques such as optical coherence tomography and microcomputed tomography to study intracochlear anatomy and mechanics. Beyond cochlear mechanics, I have always been deeply interested in microbiology and neurobiology. This interest was further strengthened during the Biology of the Inner Ear course at the Marine Biological Laboratory, where I had the opportunity to explore the molecular and physiological aspects of hearing in multiple species, and to connect with inspiring researchers from around the world. My growing curiosity about intracochlear microbiology has led to a research stay at the InnerEarLab of Prof. Tobias Moser at UMG Göttingen, Germany. Through this stay, I aim to get a deeper understanding of structural, physiological, and molecular perspectives of the cochlea.

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Hee So Kim, B.A.

Hee So Kim is a second-year PhD student at Carnegie Mellon University, pursuing a Ph.D. in Neural Computation. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Neuroscience from Wellesley College with a minor in Computer Science. During her undergraduate studies and in the years following graduation, Hee So worked with Dr. Ev Fedorenko in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT, investigating the neural basis of prosody. Currently, Hee So works under the mentorship of Dr. Jenelle Feather and Dr. Abby Noyce, exploring the intersection of neuroscience, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence. Her work focuses on leveraging computational modeling and behavioral approaches to understand how complex sensory information, such as environmental sounds, is processed, categorized, and transformed into meaningful representations in the brain. By integrating methods from cognitive neuroscience and machine learning--including psychophysics, fMRI, and computational modeling--she aims to uncover the computations underlying the transformation of acoustic signals into semantic information. Beyond the lab, Hee So enjoys playing tennis, rock climbing, and cooking Korean food.

Justin Kim, B.S.

Justin Jeeyoung Kim is a researcher at Johns Hopkins University with an interest in vestibular neuroscience. His current work focuses on overcoming significant technical barriers in the field by developing a low-cost, accessible method for two-photon imaging of cortical activity during vestibular stimulation in mice. As an early-career scientist, he aims to connect with peers and established leaders to discuss his novel methodology, specifically seeking feedback and potential collaborations related to advanced imaging techniques, genetic tools, and computational models. He is a graduate of Johns Hopkins University, holding Bachelor of Arts degrees in Chemistry and Neuroscience.

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Megan Kirchgessner, Ph.D.

My interests in the postnatal development and plasticity of auditory cortex processing for hearing and communication are born out of my diverse research experiences and my longstanding fascination with neurodevelopmental disorders. After conducting varied undergraduate research projects in cognitive sciences at Rice University related to language, social attention, and autism, I was interested to study brain connectivity at the level of circuits and cell-types for my PhD in Neurosciences at UC San Diego. Advised by Dr. Edward Callaway at the Salk Institute, I studied the functional diversity of corticothalamic cell-types involved in mouse visual processing, using optogenetics and silicon probe recordings to find that two distinct cortical neuron populations have very different "driving" versus "modulating" effects on visual activity in the thalamus. For my postdoc, I sought to merge my doctoral expertise in cortical circuitry and sensory physiology with my longstanding interests in neurodevelopment. As a Simons Junior Fellow in the lab of Dr. Robert Froemke, I gained additional expertise in two-photon calcium imaging and developed methodology for longitudinal recordings of the developing auditory cortex in young mice from hearing onset into adulthood. My postdoctoral research is revealing how auditory cortex representations of auditory stimuli, from simple tones to complex vocalizations, emerge and change with age and experience in the postnatal brain. I aspire to establish my own research program using these tools to investigate environmental and neuromodulatory influences on auditory cortex development and experience-dependent plasticity that I hope will yield insights into human language development and neurodevelopmental disorders.

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Conner Kojima, B.A.

Conner Kojima is a medical student at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California, where he is pursuing research in otolaryngology under the mentorship of Dr. John Oghalai. His work focuses on applying artificial intelligence and computer vision to optical coherence tomography (OCT) imaging of the inner ear, developing deep learning models to segment and analyze cochlear structures. Through this work, he aims to advance understanding of how cellular and acellular components contribute to cochlear amplification and hearing function. Before medical school, Conner graduated summa cum laude from the University of Southern California with a Bachelor's degree in Human Biology and Data Science. His undergraduate research in computational biology and bioinformatics included the development of several open-source analytical pipelines for large-scale metagenomic and proteomic datasets, resulting in multiple peer-reviewed publications in journals such as Scientific Data, Environmental Microbiology Reports, and The ISME Journal. Conner's combined background in medicine, engineering, and data science informs his approach to developing clinically relevant AI tools for imaging and diagnostics in otolaryngology. Beyond research, he serves as Outreach Chair for the Otolaryngology Student Interest Group and Research Coordinator for the Radiology Student Interest Group at USC, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among students interested in medical imaging and technology.

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Carolyn Kroger, Ph.D.

Carolyn ("Carrie") Kroger is a 3rd year postdoctoral fellow in the lab of Dr. Anahita Mehta at the Kresge Hearing Research Institute, Department of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery at the University of Michigan. She completed her B.A. in Psychology from the University of Arkansas in 2015 working with Dr. Elizabeth Margulis. She completed her graduate studies at Michigan State University with Dr. Devin McAuley receiving an M.A. (2019) and Ph.D. (2022) in Psychology with a specialization certificate in Cognitive Science. Carrie is interested in how temporal and non-temporal features interact in auditory perception and motor action, including how pitch, space, and timing contribute to stream segregation and speech understanding. Her recent work has focused on spatiotemporal auditory interactions in younger and older adults with normal hearing and single-sided deaf individuals with unilateral cochlear implants. She is thrilled to be presenting some of this work to the ARO community with the hopes of strengthening existing connections and forming new ones with other researchers in the field. She hopes to someday start her own lab where she will use interdisciplinary approaches to answer important questions about temporal aspects of auditory and motor function in healthy aging and individuals with neurological disorders.

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Seulgi Lee, M.S., Ph.D. Candidate

Seulgi LEE is currently a Ph.D. student in the Department of Otorhinolaryngology at Dankook University. She completed her Master's degree in Nano Biomedical Science and Regenerative Medical Sciencein 2015. After graduation, she gained hands-on experience in the biotechnology industry, where she contributed as a co-author to a peer-reviewed research article on a triple knockout strategy targeting GGTA1, CMAH, and B4GALNT2 genes in Jeju native pigs. This work involved advanced transgenic genome editing technologies, particularly relevant to the field of xenotransplantation. Her current doctoral research focuses on developing inner ear organoids from human induced pluripotent stem cells (hiPSCs), with an emphasis on creating triple reporter cell linesthat can be applied to drug testing and therapeutic evaluation. Her research interests include stem cell-based regenerative medicineand CRISPR-mediated gene editing, with the broader goal of advancing auditory regeneration strategies by integrating these technologies. Seulgi values active listening and collaborationin both experimental design and research discussions. She believes that embracing diverse perspectives often leads to creative solutions and scientific innovation. Her thoughtful and communicative approach to research fosters productive teamwork and enriches her ability to contribute meaningfully in both academic and interdisciplinary settings.

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Yige Li, M.S.

Yige Li is currently a PhD candidate in Professor Geng-Lin Li's lab in the Eye & ENT Hospital, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. Yige is highly skilled in patch-clamp recording in mouse cochlea and auditory brainstem slices. Her research is focused on elucidating the physiological mechanisms of hearing, and functional and synaptic changes in deafness models. Since joining the Li lab in 2019, Yige has transitioned from a visiting student to a research assistant and now a PhD candidate, making significant contributions to multiple researches. She has been instrumental in projects ranging from gene therapy, where she assessed the functional recovery of hair cell ribbon synapses, to hair cell regeneration, where she applied patch-clamp recording to characterize the functional maturation of newly generated hair cells in the mouse cochlea. In her doctoral research, Yige investigates the functional mechanisms of CHD7 in sensorineural hearing loss. She utilizes a CHD7-haploinsufficiency mouse model, combining patch-clamp recording in cochlear hair cells and cochlear nucleus bushy cells to examine changes in synaptic function and neuronal excitability. Scheduled to graduate in July 2026, Yige plans to seek a postdoctoral position to further her study in hearing, with a focus on synaptic transmission and plasticity across various deafness models.

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Yulin Li, Ph.D. Student

IYulin Li received a BSc in Bioengineering from Sichuan University and is currently a PhD candidate at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, supported by the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme. Her research investigates the molecular mechanisms of mechanoelectrical transduction (MET) ion-channel complexes—principally TMC1/2 and TMIE—using complementary in vitro and in vivo approaches. She also explores the lipid-scramblase activity of ion channels and the mechanisms that underlie this activity. Yulin's experimental repertoire includes biochemical and cell-biological methods, mass spectrometry, and functional assays of scramblase activity in cellular and liposome model systems. For in vivo studies, she performs cochlear immunofluorescence and immunohistochemistry to assess hair-cell morphology and the localization of MET complexes. Motivated by a strong interest in mechanosensory transduction and ion-channel biology, she aims to advance fundamental understanding of ion-channel function and plans to explore therapeutic approaches for diseases associated with ion-channel dysfunction.

Matheus Macedo-Lima, Ph.D.

Matheus (Matt)'s research career has been dedicated to studying auditory perception and learning. As a PhD student at University of Massachusetts with Dr. Luke Remage-Healey, Matt studied neuroestrogen and dopamine modulation of auditory association learning in a songbird. Then, as a postdoc at the University of Maryland with Dr. Melissa Caras, Matt studied top-down modulation of auditory perception and perceptual learning in Mongolian gerbils. Matt has developed a broad skill set in neurophysiological techniques including in vitro patch clamp, in vivo high channel count-electrophysiology coupled to neuropharmacology and optogenetics, and fiber photometry in freely moving animals. Matt's focus has now shifted to developing his own independent research topic, investigating how reward signaling supports auditory perceptual learning. In the long range, his research could inform the development of strategies to enhance everyday perceptual skills or to treat sensory dysfunction in the hard-of-hearing population or in populations with dopamine signaling dysfunction (i.e., ADHD, schizophrenia, Parkinson's, autism). He was recently awarded an NIH/NIDCD R21Early Career Award to pursue this new line of research. Matt is thrilled to be an ARO member and travel awardee and looks forward to receiving feedback on his postdoctoral work and to networking for establishing future collaborations and discovering faculty job opportunities.

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Alexis Deighton MacIntyre, Ph.D.

I am a multidisciplinary cognitive neuroscientist who studies auditory and sensorimotor processing with applications to speech and hearing sciences. My interests include the manner in which we make use of patterns to navigate complex sequenced behaviour, like holding a conversation in a loud bar or chopping vegetables along to the rhythm of your kitchen soundtrack. I also research breath control during speech, as well as speaker- and voice-specific characteristics. I use a variety of experimental, statistical, and computational methods to investigate these topics, working with acoustic, behavioural, kinematic, and electro-physiological data. I am currently an Early Career Research Fellow jointly funded by the Leverhulme and Isaac Newton Trusts at the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit at Cambridge University and a Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College.

Kiran Marla, B.S.

Kiran Marla is a second-year medical student at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine with research interests in otolaryngology, specifically auditory function. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Human Biology and Society from the University of California, Los Angeles. Kiran began his otolaryngology research in epidemiology, examining socioeconomic disparities in head and neck cancer outcomes, inspired by his undergraduate work in public health. As he progressed through his medical education, he developed an interest in the molecular mechanisms underlying hearing disorders, leading him to pursue basic science research investigating the renin–angiotensin system in the inner ear. His current research utilizes auditory brainstem response (ABR) testing in mouse models to evaluate how angiotensin receptor signaling affects cochlear injury and recovery following noise exposure. As a recipient of the ARO Travel Award, Kiran will present this research at the ARO MidWinter Meeting. He aspires to become a physician-scientist in the field of otolaryngology and is passionate about research in therapeutic strategies to improve hearing outcomes.

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Charles Murphey, B.S.

Charlie Murphey is an MD-PhD student at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. Charlie grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania before completing his B.S. degree in neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh in 2022. At Pitt, he researched the vestibular system's influence on autonomic control in the laboratory of Dr. Bill Yates. Since then, Charlie has completed two years of medical school at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and is now working toward a PhD in neuroscience in the laboratory of Dr. Jaime García-Añoveros. His research primarily concerns the development and function of cochlear innervation. In the future, Charlie hopes to complete otolaryngology residency after his MD-PhD training to become a physician-scientist specializing in both auditory research and the treatment of ailments of the head and neck. Outside of research and medicine, Charlie is an avid sports fan that closely follows all professional and college teams from Pittsburgh.

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Satyabrata Parida, Ph.D.

Dr. Satyabrata Parida is a postdoctoral researcher at the Oregon Health & Science University in Portland, Oregon. His primary research interest is to understand how hearing loss affects the neural processing of complex sounds in challenging environments. During his graduate work, Dr. Parida developed and applied signal-processing tools to characterize how noise-induced hearing loss degrades the peripheral coding of various speech features in noisy environments, which pose communication challenges for listeners with hearing loss. Subsequently, as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, he demonstrated the importance of incorporating adaptive neural mechanisms in computational models of auditory categorization to explain behavioral performance in noisy and reverberant conditions. He also led and collaborated on several studies to develop accurate and time-efficient noninvasive diagnostic metrics to assess cochlear tonotopic distortions, frequency tuning, and temporal modulation coding. His current research, funded by a NIH K99/R00 award, investigates how neural populations in the auditory cortex encode natural sound categories. Using large-scale cortical electrophysiology and deep learning, he has developed a general cortical encoding model that accurately accounts for neural responses to a wide range of dynamic natural stimuli. This model reveals a low-dimensional latent manifold that explains high-dimensional neural activity. The manifold is largely conserved across animals, highlighting generalizable neural computations for natural sound processing. His future work will address key limitations in current models of central processing by assessing whether manifold-based models can replicate biological confusion patterns in auditory categorization and the central effects of hearing loss on complex-sound processing.

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Jeffrey Parra-Munevar, B.A.

Jeffrey is a third-year PhD student in the Graduate Program in Neuroscience at the University of Washington. Prior to graduate school, he earned a B.A. in Biology and Psychology from Rutgers University. While at Rutgers, Jeffrey worked under the supervision of Dr. Robin Davis, investigating the roles of cell-type heterogeneity in the murine spiral ganglion using whole-cell patch clamp electrophysiology. His research focused on understanding the neural coding strategies these neurons use to optimize and transmit auditory signals across the eight cranial nerve. As a graduate student, Jeffrey has expanded his interests in auditory neurophysiology from the periphery to the central auditory system. Under the supervision of Dr. Nikolai Dembrow in the department of Neurobiology & Biophysics, he employs multimodal approaches to study how neuronal cell-type diversity contributes to auditory processing at different levels of the macaque auditory cortex. By combining state-of-the-art techniques such as patch-seq and two-photon calcium imaging, he is able to characterize these neuron types and elucidate the computations they perform at the single-cell level. Jeffrey's research is currently supported by a T32 training grant in auditory neuroscience and the Virginia Merrill Bloedel Trainee Award.

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Aara Patel, Ph.D.

Kayla Minesinger is a 4th-year PhD candidate at the University of Miami, working in Dr. Suhrud Rajguru's Neurotherapeutics Lab. Her research focuses on inner ear pathology, with a particular interest in understanding the impact of noise exposure on cochlear implantation hearing preservation outcomes. Utilizing her biomedical engineering background, Kayla preclinically models clinically relevant research, aiming to unravel the mechanisms underlying poor auditory outcomes in CI patients with prior noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL). Kayla's work stems from clinical observations of patients, including veterans with high noise exposure histories, who experience suboptimal CI outcomes. These cases highlight the compounded effects of neural damage from noise exposure and surgical trauma. To address this, her research recreates these conditions in animal models, allowing for the exploration of functional changes and potential therapeutic interventions. Overall, Kayal's contributions to the field support the development of treatments to mitigate auditory trauma and improve quality of life for individuals with hearing loss. Her ultimate goal is to advance therapeutic strategies to address both temporary and permanent hearing loss through advanced translational research. When not in the lab, Kayla is passionate about mentoring young scientists and advocating for innovative approaches in auditory health research.

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Madhurima Patra, B.S.

I am a Ph.D. candidate in Biomedical Engineering at Purdue University, where my research explores how the brain encodes complex acoustic patterns using human and chinchilla EEG. My work combines signal processing, computational modeling, and auditory neuroscience to uncover neural representations of spectro-temporal modulations across species. A major component of my work involves cross-species comparisons of neural encoding. By aligning electrophysiological data from humans and chinchillas, I examine how auditory cortical dynamics preserve temporal and spectral information across scales. These analyses leverage information-theoretic metrics and statistical modeling to quantify mutual information between sound structure and neural responses. I am also working on designing and validating a high-resolution chinchilla EEG cap that enhances spatial and temporal resolution and reduces motion artifacts in animal models. I have presented my work at the Society for Neuroscience (2024) and the Association for Research in Otolaryngology (2024, 2025) conferences, where I shared insights into cross-species neural correlates of spectro-temporal processing. The novel findings I plan to present at this year's ARO integrate EEG-derived features with behavioral ACT performance to reveal how cortical dynamics reflect perceptual sensitivity to temporal and spectral structure in speech-like stimuli, and identify neural markers that predict individual differences in speech perception. Through this work, I aim to integrate computational and experimental approaches to advance understanding of neural coding in hearing and contribute to the development of next-generation auditory diagnostics and neurotechnologies.

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Seth Peacock, B.S.

My current work involves analyzing the self-coherence of oscillations in spontaneous otoacoustic emissions. I began work on this project with Professor Christopher Bergevin at York University during the 2024 Fields Undergraduate Research Program. As a musician, the phenomenon of hearing has always fascinated me, as have the signal processing algorithms underlying the tools of music production; I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to explore these interests through our research. I have a wide range of mathematical interests but am most excited by stochastic/nonlinear dynamics and signal processing. I recently graduated from Ohio State University with a B.S. in applied mathematics and am currently applying for PhD programs to begin in autumn 2026.

Samantha Radomski, B.S.

Samantha (Sam) Radomski is a 3rd year graduate student in the Physiology Department at the University of Kentucky. Sam earned a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Research (research concentration) with Spanish and Chemistry minors from Eastern Kentucky University in 2023. Currently, Sam works in the lab of Dr. Cata Velez-Ortega, PhD where she is investigating the interplay between biological sex and TRPA1 signaling on cochlear responses as well as the role of TRPA1 activity on hearing sensitivity before and after noise exposure. Sam is passionate about working to improve her technical skills as a researcher, communication skills as a professional, and transferable skills as an academic. Outside of the lab, Sam enjoys experimenting with new recipes, reading, and crafting.

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Rose Rizzi, B.S.

Rose Rizzi is a dual PhD Candidate in Neuroscience and Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences at Indiana University (Auditory Cognitive Neuroscience Lab, PI: Gavin Bidelman, PhD). She holds a bachelor's degree in Cognitive and Behavioral Neuroscience from Virginia Tech. Rose's primary research focuses on understanding the neural and perceptual mechanisms underlying individual differences in speech perception in noise and speech sound categorization. She uses EEG and MRI to investigate structural and functional neural correlates of perceptual differences across brainstem and cortical levels of auditory processing. Ultimately, she hopes to identify mechanisms of successful speech in noise perception to develop novel interventions to improve receptive communication.

Mark Saddler, Ph.D.

II am a postdoc in the Hearing Systems Research Section at DTU developing machine learning models of human hearing. I am interested in how our ears and environment shape auditory perception and my research focuses on neural coding, hearing loss, and audio enhancement via deep learning.

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Toshihito Sahara, M.D.

Toshihito Sahara is a medical doctor and PhD candidate in the Department of Otorhinolaryngology and Head and Neck Surgery at the University of Tokyo, and a research fellow in the Department of Physiology at Yokohama City University. His research focuses on the central auditory system and its underlying synaptic plasticity, exploring how the human brain reorganizes itself in response to both profound hearing loss and subsequent auditory restoration. Sahara leads a multicenter clinical study investigating first-in-human molecular evidence of auditory cortical plasticity at the synaptic level, using [^{11}C]K-2, a novel PET tracer that selectively labels surface AMPA receptors, the core molecules underlying synaptic plasticity such as long-term potentiation (LTP). His study tracks dynamic changes in AMPA receptor density before and after cochlear implantation in 30 adult patients. The results provide the first direct in vivo evidence of human synaptic reorganization following sensory recovery. Sahara is deeply interested in auditory plasticity, which explores how hearing experiences shape the human brain. Because language in most people is primarily acquired through hearing, it forms the foundation for speech and language processing and higher cognitive functions. Through his research, he hopes to uncover how auditory experience supports cognitive functions and why hearing loss can lead to their decline. Receiving the ARO Travel Award enables Sahara to share his findings with the global auditory research community, strengthen international collaborations, and contribute to advancing translational auditory neuroscience.

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Lubriel Sambolin-Escobales, Ph.D.

My current research focuses on the genetic and age-related mechanisms underlying hearing loss, using mouse models to investigate auditory responses and cochlear pathology. Attending the ARO MidWinter Meeting will allow me to engage directly with leading scientists in the field, exchange ideas, and receive feedback that will sharpen both my experimental approaches and data interpretation. The meeting's highly collaborative environment is especially valuable for early-career scientists like me, offering exposure to innovative methodologies and opportunities to build interdisciplinary partnerships. Beyond the scientific sessions, I am particularly excited to participate in career development workshops and mentoring activities. These experiences will help me refine my communication skills, essential for translating complex findings into meaningful insights for both academic and operational audiences. This award also supports my broader goal of bridging basic research with applied contexts, including military operational readiness and public health. I am committed to contributing actively to the ARO community and to leveraging this experience to enhance the rigor, relevance, and impact of my work. Thank you for this generous support. I look forward to representing ARO with professionalism, curiosity, and a collaborative spirit

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Aidan Seidle, B.S.

Aidan Seidle is a postbac researcher and lab manager in the McPherson-McNato Auditory Perception Lab in Purdue's Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences Department. He earned a B.S. in Cognitive Science from UCLA in 2024, where he investigated perceptual learning in Dr. Barbara Knowlton's Cognitive Neuroscience Lab. His current research focuses on understanding individual differences in auditory perception to gain greater insight into variations in the auditory system and develop better individualized treatments for hearing loss. He also studies how to effectively and efficiently benchmark behavior-brain-model alignment for auditory artificial neural networks (ANNs), and he uses ANNs to probe how different acoustic features support complex perceptual decisions.

Yvette Shu, B.A.

Yvette Shu is an undergraduate student at Johns Hopkins University. She has conducted otolaryngology research with Professor Soroush Sadeghi for 3 years and has specialized in vestibular sensory evoked potential (VsEP) procedures. Yvette is an aspiring physician and is passionate about using scientific research to improve the lives of those who need it most. She has also volunteered in clinical settings, where she deepened her understanding of the physician-patient relationship and the human side of medicine. She hopes to one day serve as a physician in areas with limited medical resources.

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Udbhav Singhal, Ing.

Udbhav Singhal is a fifth-year PhD student working under the supervision of Doc. Norbert Kopčo at the Institute of Computer Science, P.J. Šafárik University in Košice, Slovakia. He is also a Marie Curie Sklodowska Actions visiting researcher at the Sound Mind Collaboratory, Northeastern University, Boston collaborating with Prof. Aaron Seitz where he is investigating how reverberation affects spatial release from masking (SRM) in multi-talker environments using P.A.R.T. One of the major challenges many people struggle to understand speech in noise or reverberant places especially older adults. Udbhav's primary research focuses on the reweighting of binaural cues specifically interaural time differences (ITD) and interaural level differences (ILD) and on determining trading ratios (TR). This approach allows for meaningful comparisons across different training studies, helping to identify which methods are most effective for the users. Currently, Udbhav is exploring whether audiovisual training with dynamic cues can induce spectral reweighting for horizontal sound localization in real reverberant environments. His goal is to assess whether increasing the weight of either high-frequency (HF) or low-frequency (LF) spectral components can enhance localization accuracy. And testing whether this spectral reweighting generalizes to binaural cue reweighting at mid frequencies in virtual environments in collaboration with Bernhard Laback and Maike Klingel at the Acoustic Research Institute, Vienna. Beyond the lab, he's actively involved in volunteer work, especially as a mentor supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds. And, when he's not working, you'll likely find him travelling, or on the court playing florball/badminton.

Anjali Sinha, Ph.D.

I am a postdoc in the lab of Dr. Maria Geffen at the University of Pennsylvania. I earned my bachelor's in engineering from PES University, Bangalore, India and my M.S. in Neuroscience from University at Buffalo, NY. I received my Ph.D. from University of Rochester, NY, where I trained in the lab of Dr. J. Christopher Holt. For my dissertation, I investigated the signaling mechanisms underlying efferent mediated modulation of primary vestibular afferents, using pharmacology and electrophysiology. Currently, as a postdoc, I am exploring neuronal correlates that underlie auditory categorization. I utilize a combination of in-vivo electrophysiological recordings from chronically implanted high-density electrodes in combination with computational modeling, to understand how different neuronal cell types and different regions of the brain contribute to category learning.

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Maia Smith, BSA, MS

Maia Smith, BSA, MS, is a second-year medical student at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) John Sealy School of Medicine, where she is pursuing research at the intersection of metabolism and otolaryngology. She earned her Master of Science in Cell Systems & Anatomy from UT Health San Antonio and her Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of Texas at Austin. Maia's research bridges basic and clinical science, exploring how metabolic dysregulation influences disease processes within the head and neck, specifically within the field of otology and neurotology.

Noor Sourman, B.S.

Noor Souman is a second-year medical student at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry from the University of Houston. Under the mentorship of Dr. Tomoko Makishima, she is researching the role of trefoil factor proteins in relation to COVID-19-induced anosmia in hamster models.

Anu Sreeinvasan Nair, Ph.D.

I am a Texas state-licensed audiologist and a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Texas at Austin. My work focuses on understanding how subclinical auditory deficits in children, including subtle cochlear dysfunction and reduced neural fidelity, affect listening and speech perception, particularly in complex, multi-talker environments. Using behavioral and electrophysiological measures, I investigate how these early, often undetected auditory changes shape children's listening and communication abilities.

Tasuma Tanmy, M.S.

I am a final-year Ph.D. candidate in the Biomedical Sciences (Neuroscience) program at Kent State University and Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED), under the mentorship of Dr. Yong Lu. My research focuses on the developmental regulation of calcium signaling in postsynaptic neurons of the medial nucleus of the trapezoid body (MNTB) within the mouse auditory brainstem. I have extensive experience in calcium imaging using transgenic GCaMP mouse models and electrophysiological recordings, integrating these approaches to uncover how receptor-specific calcium dynamics contribute to auditory circuit maturation. My passion for this research stems from a deep curiosity about how neural communication develops and adapts to sensory experience, and how early calcium signaling mechanisms establish the foundation for precise auditory processing. My manuscript based on this work is currently under peer review. I have been attending the ARO MidWinter Meeting since 2021, which has been an invaluable platform for learning, networking, and engaging with leaders in the auditory neuroscience community. As I approach the completion of my Ph.D., I am eager to pursue postdoctoral opportunities in auditory neuroscience. I am honored to receive the ARO Travel Award and look forward to attending the 2026 MidWinter Meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to share my research and connect with the broader auditory community.

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Rahilla Tarfa, M.D., Ph.D.

Rahilla Tarfa, MD, PhD is a physician–scientist and Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery resident at the University of Washington. Raised in Nigeria, she brings a global and interdisciplinary perspective to patient care and research. Dr. Tarfa earned her BS in Bioinformatics and Computational Biology from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and completed her PhD in Neuroscience through the NIH Graduate Partnership Program at Brown University, where she studied potassium currents underlying excitability in midbrain dopamine neuron subpopulations. She obtained her medical degree from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Her current research focuses on the molecular and cellular basis of vestibular function, leveraging single-cell and multi-omic approaches to investigate neuronal diversity and sensory signaling in the inner ear. Bridging her neuroscience background with surgical training, Dr. Tarfa is passionate about translational discoveries that improve diagnosis and treatment of balance and hearing disorders. Beyond the lab and operating room, she is dedicated to mentorship, diversity in medicine, and advancing equity in academic surgery.

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Nicole Tomassi, Ph.D.

I am a postdoctoral fellow at Mass. Eye and Ear / Harvard Medical School and recently earned my PhD in computational neuroscience at Boston University. My doctoral research involved investigating auditory feedback control mechanisms and speech production in clinical populations. In my current role, my research is focused on understanding and modeling the electrode-neuron interface in cochlear implant users.

Rohan Tonk, B.S.

Rohan Tonk (he/him) is a current PhD student and NSF Fellow at the University of Colorado Boulder, studying Biochemistry. He received a BS in Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2023, followed by postbaccalaureate training at the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. He is interested in protein biophysics and mechanosensation in cells, particularly the inner ear MET complex. Outside of the lab, you can find Rohan trail running in the mountains or baking chocolate chip cookies.

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Andrew Van Domelen, B.S.

Andrew Van Domelen is a doctoral researcher in medical genetics at the University of Manitoba investigating the genetic connections between age-related hearing loss (ARHL) and dementia risk. His research addresses a critical gap in understanding sensory-cognitive decline by using large-scale genomic and spatial transcriptomic analyses to map the genetic and cellular mechanisms linking specific ARHL subtypes to distinct dementia traits. Recognizing that previous studies have often relied on broad, non-specific measures, his work emphasizes the importance of precise phenotyping of both auditory and cognitive functions in genetic studies. This approach positions his research at the intersection of sensory genomics, neurodegenerative disease, and aging biology, with potential implications for early intervention strategies. His methodology involves advanced bioinformatics and biostatistical approaches, including large-scale genomic analysis, applied through R and command-line environments to decode complex trait architecture. His research has been supported by fellowships ranging from university to federal levels, and he has been recognized as a three-minute thesis (3MT) finalist and invited to lead research skills workshops. Beyond his research, he serves as Vice President of the University of Manitoba's Health Sciences Graduate Student Association. He is committed to advancing the field of medical genomics and precision medicine, with particular interest in postdoctoral opportunities exploring complex disease architecture and the sensory-cognitive interface.

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Evan Vesper, B.S.

Evan Vesper is a PhD candidate at Johns Hopkins University in the Department of Biomedical Engineering at the Vestibular NeuroEngineering Laboratory in Baltimore, Maryland. His PhD work focuses on vestibular implants. He investigates the efficacy of the Multichannel Vestibular implant in its first-in-human clinical trial and how to optimize vestibular stimulation. He also investigates safe direct current stimulation of the vestibular system and how it differs from typical charge-balanced pulsatile stimulation. Prior to coming to Johns Hopkins University, he received a B.S. in Electrical Engineering from Case Western Reserve University. There, he did research with the Motion Studies Laboratory at the Cleveland VA Hospital, investigating how restoring plantar pressure sensation to lower limb amputees affects muscle activation during walking. He received a national Barry Goldwater scholarship in recognition of his research and academic excellence.

Emma Wawrzynek, M.S.

Emma Wawrzynek is a fourth-year PhD student at MIT in the Electrical Engineering and Computer Science department under the advisorship of Professor Jeffrey Lang and Professor Heidi Nakajima. Her research focuses on cochlear implants, a medical device that restores hearing to people with sensorineural deafness. She works on the design, fabrication, and testing of a piezoelectric implantable microphone for cochlear implants. Prior to MIT, Emma received a B.S. in Bioengineering at University of California, Berkeley, where she conducted research on printed, flexible electronics with Professor Ana Claudia Arias.

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Damen Wilson, B.S.

Damen Wilson is a fourth year MD/PhD student in the Medical Scientist Training Program (MSTP) at Indiana University and Purdue University, studying Biomedical Engineering. His previous research has focused primarily on vagus nerve stimulation as a treatment for disorders involving dysautonomia. He also brings industry experience from Stryker and Cook Research Incorporated, where he contributed to the development and testing of novel medical devices. More recently, Damen joined the Interdisciplinary Training Program in Auditory Neuroscience (TPAN, T32) at Purdue University, where he was introduced to the field of auditory neuroscience. Under the mentorship of Dr. Matthew Ward, his current work bridges his prior expertise in neural engineering with a new focus on tinnitus, aiming to enhance vagus nerve stimulation therapies through precision medicine and closed-loop approaches. He is passionate about advancing personalized medicine and aspires to integrate this focus into his future career as a physician-engineer.

Jiayi Wu, B.A.

Jiayi Wu is a PhD candidate in the Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine program at Stanford University who is jointly mentored by Dr. Maggie S. Matern and Dr. Stefan Heller. Jiayi is originally from Shanghai, China. After earning her bachelor's degree in biology from Grinnell College, she obtained additional research experience as a research technician at Columbia University in New York City. During her time at Columbia, she discovered her passion for stem cell research and decided to pursue a Ph.D. Jiayi's work focuses on regeneration and leveraging stem cells to develop novel treatments. Using mouse embryonic stem cell-derived inner ear organoids, she is working to understand the cell cycle and proliferation of supporting cells, with the goal of driving mammalian post-mitotic supporting cells back into the cell cycle. Her long-term goal is to reactivate the regenerative potential of supporting cells for sensory hair cell regeneration in the mammalian inner ear, with the ultimate aim of treating auditory and vestibular disorders.

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Selin Yalcinoglu, B.S.

Selin Yalcinoglu is a doctoral student in the Department of Ophthalmology, Visual and Anatomical Sciences at Wayne State University School of Medicine, working under the mentorship of Dr. Avril Genene Holt. Her research investigates the neural mechanisms underlying hearing loss and tinnitus, focusing on how noise exposure disrupts neuronal excitability and plasticity in central auditory pathways. Specifically, she examines how calcium channel dysregulation and dopaminergic signaling contribute to maladaptive neuroplasticity following auditory trauma. She has led projects refining translational behavioral assays, including the gap-inhibition of acoustic startle reflex paradigm, to improve the reliability of pre-clinical tinnitus assessment. Her broader research aims to integrate multiple neurochemical systems, ion channels, GABAergic circuits, and neuromodulators, to identify therapeutic targets for restoring auditory function and preventing cognitive decline associated with sensory loss. Her work has been presented at national conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals. Through her Ph.D. research, she seeks to bridge basic auditory neuroscience and translational otolaryngology to advance interventions that preserve communication and quality of life for individuals affected by hearing loss.

Tianying Zhai, M.S.

Tianying Zhai, M.S. is a research associate in the Department of Surgery, Section of Otolaryngology (ENT), at Yale University. She earned her Master of Science degree in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. Her research primarily focuses on two major areas. The first investigates the neural and molecular mechanisms of hyperacusis, aiming to elucidate its underlying causes and pathophysiological processes through a combination of behavioral assessments and auditory function tests. The second explores auditory biomarkers associated with Alzheimer's disease (AD), with the goal of identifying early auditory indicators linked to neurodegeneration. Ms. Zhai applies advanced molecular and neurophysiological approaches—including RNA sequencing, digital PCR, and mouse genetic models—to study auditory dysfunction under both normal and disease conditions. She has presented her findings at international meetings such as ARO and contributed to publications in leading journals including PNAS and Hearing Research. She continues to pursue research dedicated to understanding auditory pathophysiology in hyperacusis and AD-related hearing alterations.

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ARO 2026 TRAVEL AWARDEES

Vanessa Zhang, B.A.

Vanessa Zhang is a medical student at UMass Chan Medical School completing a dedicated research year in otology at Mass Eye and Ear and Boston Children's Hospital, mentored by Aaron K. Remenschneider, MD, MPH, in the Eaton-Peabody Laboratories. Her work applies advanced audiometry to improve diagnosis of high-frequency hearing problems in children. She leads an ARO-submitted study evaluating extended high-frequency (4–16 kHz) bone-conduction thresholds in pediatric ears to establish feasibility and reliability and to identify early disease signatures that distinguish conductive from sensorineural components. Vanessa was selected for a 2026 ARO MidWinter Meeting Travel Award. She earned a BA in Economics from Yale University and is a member of the Gold Humanism Honor Society. She plans to pursue residency in Otolaryngology–Head & Neck Surgery, aiming for a career that integrates patient-centered otology research with high-quality clinical care.

Jiake Zhong, Ph.D.

Chaoqun Zhou is a PhD student major in mechanical engineering at Columbia University co-advised by Professor Jeffrey W. Kysar and Dr. Anil K. Lalwani. Her research focuses on advancing the diagnosis and treatment of inner ear diseases through microneedle-mediated intracochlear delivery and cutting-edge imaging technologies. Her work includes investigating safe intracochlear injection of minimal dosage of gadodiamide with microneedle through the round window membrane to facilitate Ménière's disease diagnosis, developing quantitative dynamic contrast-enhanced MRI method to study the spatiotemporal distribution of delivered therapeutics and assess inner ear perfusion dynamics, and optimizing microneedle design and therapeutics delivery strategy for intracochlear injection using cochlear pharmacokinetics simulations.

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Meichan Zhu, M.D.

Dr. Meichan Zhu is a physician–scientist specializing in otorhinolaryngology and vestibular research. She is currently a PhD candidate at Maastricht University's Department of Nutrition and Movement Sciences and the ENT Department of Maastricht University Medical Center (MUMC+), under the supervision of Prof. Raymond van de Berg, Prof. Kenneth Meijer, and Dr. Christopher McCrum. Her research focuses on balance and gait dysfunction in bilateral vestibulopathy and the therapeutic potential of vestibular implants to restore postural stability and mobility. Before joining Maastricht University, Dr. Zhu practiced as an otolaryngologist at the Otorhinolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery Hospital of Guangzhou, China. She earned her Master of Medicine in Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery from Guangxi Medical University and her Bachelor of Medicine from Guangzhou Medical University. Dr. Zhu has authored multiple peer-reviewed publications in journals such as Journal of Neurology, Frontiers in Neurology, and Journal of Vestibular Research. She has presented her work internationally at the Bárány Society Meeting, the International Society of Posture and Gait Research (ISPGR), and the Vertigo Academy International. Her academic interests bridge clinical neurotology, movement science, and vestibular neuroprosthetics, with the goal of improving functional outcomes and quality of life for patients with vestibular disorders.

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Lucia Z-Rivera, Ph.D. Student

My name is Lucía Z-Rivera, a Speech-Language Pathologist from Chile. During my undergraduate training, I became involved in research at an early stage. This experience, combined with my clinical background, showed me the importance of generating empirical evidence that not only provides a deeper understanding of human communication but can also lead to new evidence-based treatments. These experiences motivated my interest in bridging clinical practice with technical and scientific approaches. Guided by this perspective, I completed a Master's in Biomedical Engineering at the Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile. I am now a Ph.D. student in the Neuroscience and Cognitive Science program at the University of Maryland. As a result of this earlier work, I developed a strong interest in otolaryngology through research on vocal motor control across different acoustic environments, including auditory feedback perturbations, which revealed the close connection between auditory perception and vocal production. Building on this foundation, my doctoral research takes a more auditory perspective, focusing on the brain's temporal dynamics in processing time-compressed speech in older adults using EEG (electroencephalography). This paradigm is clinically relevant because older listeners often face difficulties in fast conversational settings, and our work aims to uncover the neural mechanisms underlying these challenges. I am also a Fulbright Fellow supporting my doctoral training in the United States.