Professor Wilma Friedman Receives $2 Million NIH Grant

Why do epileptic seizures cause brain cells to die off, leaving patients compromised over time—and is there a way to stop it?

Professor Wilma Friedman, of the Department of Biological Sciences at Rutgers-Newark, recently received a four-year, $2 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to find out.

According to Friedman, all traumatic brain injuries cause neurons, or brain cells, to die. The process with epilepsy seizures is no different: A type of protein called a growth factor—this one is named ProNGF—binds to a cell receptor called P75 and tells the cell to die.

In other non-trauma situations, however, “the receptor doesn’t get these instructions and isn’t turned on,” says Friedman. “We’re trying to uncover why, with seizures, this occurs.”

If Friedman’s research team can understand this process, the benefits may reverberate beyond epilepsy patients to include those stricken by strokes and other traumatic brain injuries, or possibly degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s.

The recent NIH grant to study epilepsy is just one of several grants funding Friedman’s research. Each grant funds a different aspect of her work.
Greetings from NCAS/UCN! Rutgers University is again welcoming new and returning students to campus as the 2011-2012 academic year opens. It was quite an end of summer: The East Coast earthquake made its presence known, and while we sustained no serious damage, most people on campus that day felt the roll of the earth beneath them, and a couple of new, albeit minor, cracks opened in a campus building. Shortly thereafter, Hurricane Irene blew in, and while New Jersey and the surrounding states were hit hard, the campus emerged largely unscathed. So, with those dangers behind us, we are focusing on what we do best: providing excellent educational opportunities for our students. In fact, the most recent Washington Monthly national ranking of universities rated our Newark campus of Rutgers University #2 in supporting social mobility. That means we are among the best in the U.S. at effectively matriculating and graduating low-income students. Of course, you probably knew that already from your own experiences, but it is extraordinary to get such national recognition for the excellence that we champion. Since Arts & Sciences has the largest undergraduate enrollment of any school on campus, together we can take credit for and be proud of this record.

Philip L. Yeagle

Faculty Profile: Aldo Civico
Venturing into the Heart of Darkness to Bring Peace

Professor Aldo Civico brings a journalist’s acumen to his work as a cultural anthropologist specializing in urban political violence. That’s hardly surprising. He cut his teeth as an intrepid reporter in his home country, Italy, for many years before moving into academia.

His flair for combining the two approaches to grasp the nature of violent conflicts, as well as the potential for peace-building, has resulted in a unique brand of research, and an International Institute for Peace that is just getting off the ground at Rutgers-Newark.

“Our focus will be on urban violence and youth-violence prevention around the world,” says Civico, “as well as the role of women in peace building.”

Civico began his career as a freelance correspondent for Vatican Radio at the ripe old age of 18. He had enrolled at the University of Trento to study sociology around the same time, but a college degree would have to wait: Civico the journalist was taken with the burgeoning anti-mafia movement in Sicily, at the other end of the country.

He parlayed an interview with the movement’s leader, Leoluca Orlando, into a job in Sicily that lasted three years and gave him a front-row seat to the historic changes taking place: As La Casa Nostra intensified its assassination campaign of state officials, the Sicilian populace took to the streets en masse for nonviolent protests, a sign that public opinion had finally shifted against the mafia.

“To see the capacity of a social movement to bring about change was a very valuable lesson for me,” says Civico, “as was having the opportunity to work with extraordinary individuals who put their life on the line for the common good.”

Civico moved on from his job with Orlando in 1993 and, for the rest of the decade, worked as a journalist while finishing his studies.

In 2000, he moved to New York City to study international affairs at Columbia University. He met an Italian professor who...
ran the Center for International Conflict Resolution (CIRR) on campus, and began working there, designing peace-building trainings for religious leaders who had survived the 1990’s Balkan Wars, then conflict-resolution workshops for victims of violence in Medellin, Colombia.

He had found his calling.

He completed his doctorate at Columbia in applied anthropology and, from 2003 to 2007, spent every spare moment doing his dissertation field work in Colombia, interviewing survivors of that country’s long-simmering civil war, then venturing into the mountains to land a rare interview with a paramilitary leader who had massacred those victims’ families. He ended up getting the leader’s life story, plus that of 12 other group members.

“I figured it would be interesting to do field work among victimizers,” says Civico. “This is difficult, challenging, unusual research that I thought I could offer insights on.”

Civico then scored another plum interview: this one with an insurgency (ELN) leader residing in a high-security prison cell. Visits continued over the course of months, with Civico looking on at one point as the first conversations of peace talks occurred between the ELN leader and government officials. Civico went on to facilitate discussions between the Colombian government and the guerilla group, organized workshops for the negotiating team, and worked as a communications channel between parties and the U.S. ambassador in the 2005-2008 peace talks, which broke down, unfortunately.

Upon returning from Colombia, he became CIRR’s director and shepherded the center through three years of expansion before coming to Rutgers-Newark in 2010.

The idea for the International Institute for Peace, “a think-tank/do-tank bridging theory and practice,” as Civico describes it, came about in discussions with NCAS deans and colleagues in the sociology and anthropology department. The Institute will work in synergy with the newly created masters program in conflict resolution, giving students and faculty the opportunity to produce cutting-edge research while engaging in peace-building projects around the world.

Civico co-founded the Institute with Academy Award-winning actor Forest Whitaker, who’d heard Civico speak about the project at this spring’s Newark Peace Education Summit. Whitaker, having grown up in South Central Los Angeles, has been working to curb youth violence for years and is a goodwill ambassador for UNESCO. A partnership between that U.N. organization and the Institute is in the works.

For Civico, it’s been a very fulfilling life.

“I love to interact with students and be out in the field changing the lives of folks caught in challenging conditions,” says Civico. “I’m not sure you can ask for more in a lifetime.”

“To see the capacity of a social movement to bring about change was a very valuable lesson for me”
Alumni Profile: Marge Derrick
Paying It Forward for the Next Generation at Rutgers

Marge Derrick (NCAS ‘71) received a letter back in 1975 seeking a donation to Rutgers-Newark. Four years out of school, Derrick was in a position to act: She was married and had a home, a child and security.

“They asked the right person at the right time,” says Derrick. “I thought, ‘Okay, I can do this.’ And it made sense. I’d gotten scholarships from Rutgers-Newark. It was time to start paying it forward.”

She’s been paying it ever since, demonstrating a commitment to her alma mater that has inspired countless alums to get onboard and join the effort.

Her list of appointments is impressive: NCAS Dean’s Cabinet, Rutgers-Newark Alumni Association Executive Committee, Rutgers University Board of Overseers Donor Relations/Stewardship Advisory Committee, Board of Governors Audit Committee. The list goes on. Derrick is also up for a second term on the Rutgers University Board of Trustees, where she serves as Vice Chair.

Yet, it all started with a letter. And a formative experience at Rutgers-Newark, where Derrick got her degree in English but had to overcome obstacles to get there.

First semester of her junior year, she contracted a virus that required a six-week hospital stay and left her with a number of physical issues. She re-entered school with a lighter course load, “but I needed a lot of support from a lot of folks to graduate,” says Derrick, a retired credit counselor living in Montclair, N.J. NCAS Dean Henry Blumenthal and her sorority sisters stepped up, offering advising and friendship when she needed it most.

Studying at Rutgers-Newark when she did also helped form Derrick’s world view. She recites a litany of events from the period: the ’67 Newark Riots, the ’68 assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., black students taking over Conklin Hall in ’69, the ’70 Kent State and Jackson State shootings, the Vietnam War.

“My education was much more than classes. Rutgers-Newark really incorporated that social upheaval into its curriculum and gave me insights into the socioeconomic and political changes going on,” says Derrick. “The dialog and debates also matured me by instilling compassion for what others were struggling with.”

In 1998, Derrick and her husband, George, created the Derrick Family Award, a $2,500 annual scholarship that goes to NCAS undergraduates demonstrating academic merit and financial need. That award, along with the Derrick Family Endowed Scholarship, enable students to pursue internships or focus on their studies or undergraduate research without the distraction of part-time jobs.

During her years with Rutgers, Derrick has seen tremendous growth and likes the direction she sees NCAS, UCN and the university moving, though some formidable challenges lie ahead.

“There are some really impressive people steering the ship at all three campuses. Dean Yeagle is very focused and understands what needs to be done to grow NCAS and UCN,” says Derrick. “But in this financial climate, with less government funds coming in, we’ll have to be entrepreneurial to take the college, and university, to a new level. I have no doubt that with the talented and committed folks we have at Rutgers, and the support of our alumni, we’ll make that happen.”
Alumni Profile: Ronald Blandon
Alumnus Finds Ways to Keep Giving Back

Ronald Blandon (NCAS ‘72, GSED ‘77) remembers his time at Rutgers-Newark with great fondness. The politically charged environment of the late ’60s and early ’70s was an exciting time to be on campus. But for the future chemist and science teacher, one image stands out among the rest: a chemistry professor who worked tirelessly in the lab, even on weekends.

For Blandon, he was a true inspiration. “Whether you get a good or bad result, you’re always working toward something,” says Blandon. “That example focused my attention as a young person. I realized that dedication and work really mean something, and it’s all about the process and giving back to your field.”

Blandon, who worked in the pharmaceutical industry before teaching middle-school science for 28 years, knows something about giving back. After years of donating to Rutgers, the Little Silver, NJ resident has established the Helen and Roberto Blandon Memorial Scholarship in honor of his parents.

“I always wanted to give back to NCAS because Rutgers has given me so much,” says Blandon, who was born in Newark. “And my parents always inspired me. So, this is my way of paying tribute to them while helping the next generation of students.”

His $25,000 commitment provides a scholarship for the next five years to help students in these challenging economic times. The award will be given to an NCAS student who demonstrates academic merit and financial need.

“My parents always inspired me. So, this is my way of paying tribute to them while helping the next generation of students.”

Marcel Vaughn-Handy, director of development for NCAS and UCN, says Blandon’s gift speaks volumes about his dedication.

Continued on page 7
Campus News
Career Development Center Making All the Right Moves

Students who enter Hill Hall and head toward the computer labs are being greeted by a new sight at the top of the first-level ramp: a bright-red wall sporting the Career Development Center logo.

The new sign is at the core of a makeover the Career Development Center is undergoing, a series of renovations months in the making that will result in even more effective service to students and employers alike.

The project, which began in May, involves a number of intricate steps. But the reasoning behind it is clear: to provide students and employers with larger, more comfortable and private spaces in which to help transition Rutgers-Newark graduates into the exciting, if daunting, world of employment that awaits them.

“We’re thrilled, and deeply appreciate what we’ve been able to do with this renovation project,” says Tom Hopkins, director of the Career Development Center. “We were making due with the prior arrangement, but this marks a big improvement for our students and employers.”

The Center, which had been spread over three offices, is consolidating its operations to run out of two suites, located on the first and third floors of Hill Hall. It will be vacating Room 309, an office located within Student Services (ODOSA) that it has occupied since 1987.

As a result, the Center will be better equipped to provide services like career counseling and employer recruiting and interviewing, along with a career computer lab and library.

“We’ll have sealed-off rooms in each suite for more privacy, and upgraded heating and air-conditioning for comfort,” says Hopkins. “And the employer interview suite is now closer to street level, making it more convenient for employers.”

As if the construction whirlwind weren’t enough, the Center has been also tackling another big project: It is part of a massive upgrade of the career-development software system used by all three Rutgers campuses, whose benefits will be far-reaching.

For example, employers can now post a job once and have it list on any of the campuses, or on all three. The system will also have enhanced security features, guaranteeing that sensitive student information such as graduation date, GPA, major and citizenship is up to date and accurate.

Students, meanwhile, can now make appointments directly with Career Development Center counselors, and get appointment or other message reminders on all of their mobile devices (tablet, smartphone and laptop). They can also R.S.V.P. to events and career fairs via these devices to reserve a spot.

For Hopkins and his staff, the modernized, streamlined system, called RaiderNet, is a boon.

“As students reserve seats for an event, we get real-time updates that tell us if we need a larger space,” he says. Conversely, if the pharmaceutical company Merck is coming to campus, for instance, Hopkins and his staff can quickly look up how many biology majors are registered with his office to ensure adequate attendance.

The office has also started a multi-tiered marketing push to spread the word about the new system, which includes campus posters, classroom announcements and a possible postcard blitz.

“We’ve already had students comment on how much they like it,” says Hopkins. “But it will take a little time for them to learn everything it can do. Either way, we feel good that we’ll be able to provide more career-related opportunities in this challenging job market.”
Blandon  continued from page 5

“He symbolizes one of many great paths our donors and alumni can take as they consider what giving back means to them.”

Blandon, it turns out, has been making a difference in students’ lives for decades. After graduating Rutgers-Newark, he worked for the pharmaceutical division of American Cyanamide for three years before being laid off. He was 24 at the time, and searching. One of his co-workers suggested he go into teaching, given Blandon’s outgoing personality.

Blandon took the advice to heart, returning to Rutgers to pursue a master’s degree in science education. Shortly after graduating, in 1977, he began teaching science at Thorne Middle School in Middletown, NJ, where he remained until his retirement in 2004. While there, he earned his Ph.D. in childhood education at NOVA Southeastern University, taking courses at the Florida-based university’s satellite campus in Delaware.

Blandon’s family, who raised him in East Orange, NJ, always prized education. His father was an engineer with a degree from MIT, his mother a housewife who loved literature and Spanish. His uncle, who received his doctorate from Rutgers in the early 1940s, taught there in the Department of Education briefly before moving on to Monmouth College. Blandon’s aunt was also a teacher.

When his father died 10 years ago, Blandon and his mother spoke about ways to give back. He’d been a consistent donor to Rutgers upon receiving his master’s degree in 1977, making annual-fund pledges and contributions to various scholarship and athletic funds on both campuses. He’d also been donating portions of three annuities to Rutgers since the late 1990s. But when his mother passed away two years ago, Blandon decided to elevate his giving by setting up the annual scholarship for students at NCAS, where his college education began.

And Blandon is continuing to make a difference in the lives of young students in another way: by cutting his retirement short to work part-time, teaching environmental science and marine biology to K-12 children as part of the Sea Grant Science Consortium, of which Rutgers is a part. “I never tire of teaching and working with young students,” says Blandon. “As long as I can give back, I plan to do just that.”

Friedman  continued from page 1

Her overarching interest—gauging the role of neurotrophin growth factors in the brain after injury—is being funded by a long-term NIH grant begun in 2002 that runs through next year, possibly longer if she can get it renewed a second time.

“It’s extremely gratifying to have students in the lab for four or five years, and really have the chance to develop them as scientists.”

A three-year grant from the NJ Commission on Brain Injury Research is enabling Friedman’s team to look specifically into what regulates the production of the P75 cell receptor, how is it turned on, and what tells the cell to die.

Another pending NIH grant will help her team to study brain inflammation after injury, and its effect on neuronal cell death.

It’s all part of running a research lab circa 2011.

“Grants drive our operating budget,” says Friedman, who, as director of the lab, spends most of her time directing research, teaching, reviewing journal manuscripts, and writing and reviewing grants. “Most lab positions are funded exclusively through these awards.”

Funding, doing the research, and getting it published: These are the benchmarks for success in science. “And publications, which is really about communicating your results with the scientific community, become your track record for getting the next grant,” says Friedman.

The entire process keeps her lab a dynamic place, with different teams of post-docs, graduate students and undergrads coming and going. But working with students, along with the research, is what drives Friedman.

“It’s extremely gratifying to have students in the lab for four or five years, and really have the chance to develop them as scientists,” says Friedman. “The work is rigorous and rewarding. If it can lead to positive therapies for these patients, then we’ve attained our goal.”
Student Profile: Diego Ortiz
Combining a Big Heart and Eloquent Pen to Help Those Less Fortunate

Diego Ortiz spent much of his youth tagging along with his Colombian immigrant parents to their jobs as custodians. On one occasion, he remembers helping them out at the future home of the Daily Record, the Gannett chain’s Morris County, N.J., newspaper.

In 2007, Ortiz would return to that building on his own, only this time as a college sophomore working as a freelance journalist for the very same paper.

“Quite an interesting irony,” recalls Ortiz, who graduated Rutgers-Newark magna cum laude this spring. “I’d come full-circle after working very hard on my writing. It’s kind of amazing when I think about it, but I’ve been blessed with amazing opportunities.”

Ortiz’s journey from humble beginnings to outstanding student journalist are a testament to his talent and prodigious work ethic. But a deeply held compassion for the plight of those less fortunate also grounds him, portending a bright future in whatever field he chooses.

Ortiz, who came to the U.S. at age 5, grew up in Morristown, N.J. His mother showered him and his brother with affection and put meals on the table. His father routinely worked multiple jobs, always stressing education and studying.

“If I came home with a college school bill, complaining about the cost, he’d say, ‘It’s nothing compared with its value,’” says Ortiz. “He thought just getting a job and not studying was the easy temptation. He wanted us to reach higher and make something of ourselves.”

Make something of himself he did. After graduating high school, Ortiz headed to County College of Morristown (CCM) for an associate’s degree, always with an eye toward a four-year diploma and a writing career. While editor of the student paper at CCM, the Daily Record came knocking. Ortiz ended up penning nearly 50 articles for them.

At Rutgers-Newark, he rose to become editor of The Observer, all while doing advocacy work on immigration issues, carrying a double-major in journalism and Spanish Literature, commuting to campus from Morristown, and working 30 hours per week. He capped his time here by being chosen commencement speaker for the 2011 NCAS/UCN graduation ceremony, held at NJPAC.

“I wanted to leave a legacy.”

“Before I started at Rutgers, I told my girlfriend that I wanted to leave a legacy,” says Ortiz. “So it was really nice to be recognized for putting in hard work. And it was an awesome experience giving the speech at NJPAC, knowing my parents were watching me, being in front of my fellow graduates and sharing the stage with leaders of the college.”

During the summer between CCM and Rutgers-Newark, Ortiz took bit of a detour: a 3,000 mile one to be exact. He and some friends, one of whom had suffered a traumatic brain injury, biked across the country to raise money for the NJ Brain Injury Association. They netted $5,000 and had the experience of a lifetime, bolstered by the hospitality of folks they met along the way.

“The trip got us out of our comfort zone and forced us to be challenged,” says Ortiz, who uses the term “philanthropic adventure” to describe such trips. “We wanted to put a positive message out into the world, and were grateful to—and humbled by—the generosity of everyone we met. It was amazing.”

In January, Ortiz is heading off on another of his adventures, this time to Peru to teach English. Although his career plans are not firm, he knows he wants to continue with writing and immigration advocacy work, and is considering going to law school and getting an MFA in creative writing. He could also see himself teaching someday.

“I have a lot of dreams and plans, and I’m at an age where they’re constantly evolving,” he says. “Whatever I do, it will be with an eye toward making the world a better place.”

To read dispatches from Ortiz’ Peru trip, and chart his other philanthropic adventures, visit www.deardiego.com.