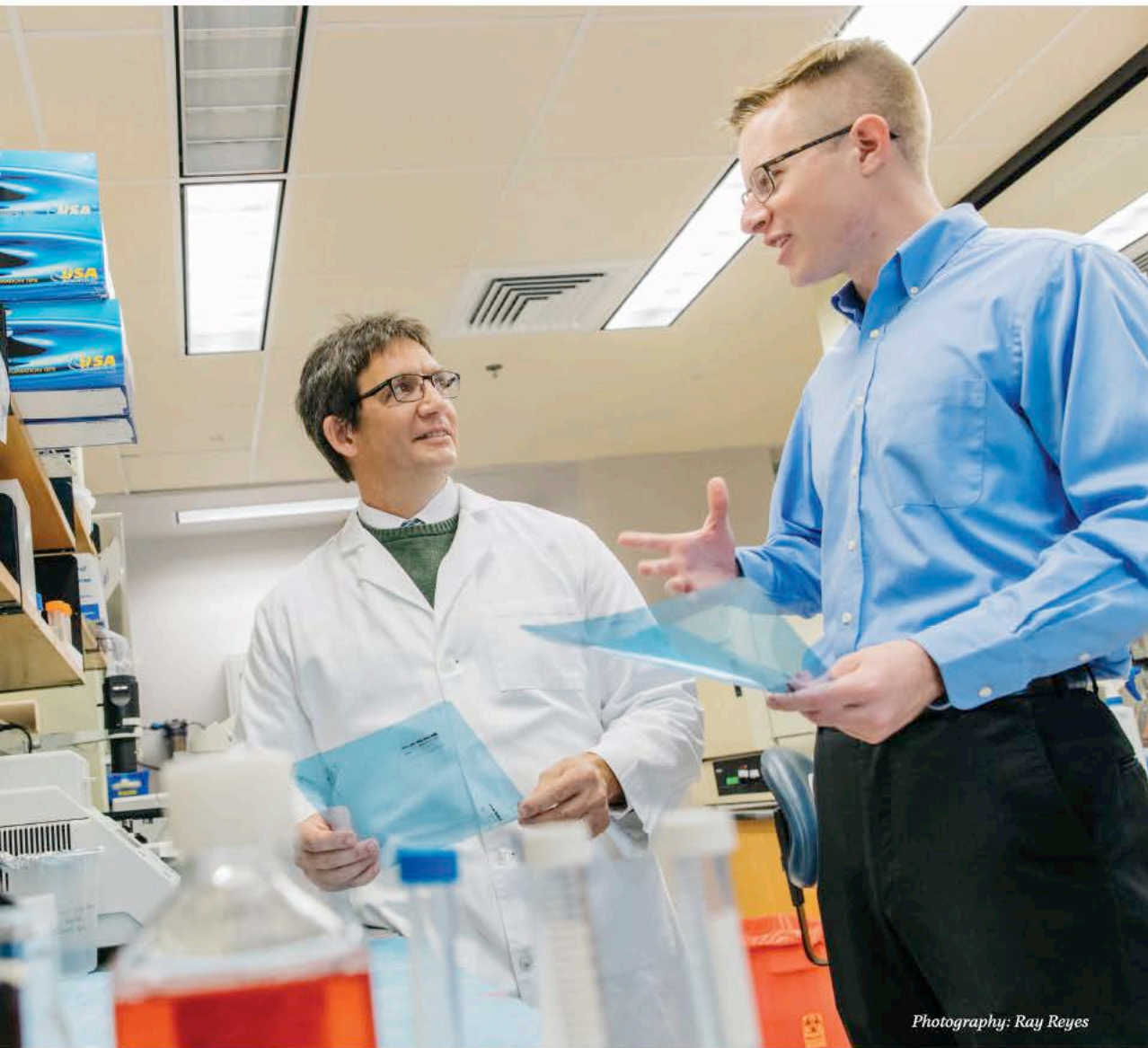


# SPARKing Scientific Interest

MOFFITT'S UNDERGRADUATE SUMMER INTERN PROGRAM



Photography: Ray Reyes

SPARK program director Doug Cress, Ph.D. (left), mentors students like Evan Johnson (right) as they create science projects with measurable goals.

## IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS SPARK.

Moffitt's first undergraduate research opportunity - the Summer Program for Advancement of Research Knowledge (SPARK) - was initiated in 1992. It was the same year Julie Djeu, Ph.D., left her lab at the University of South Florida to become Moffitt Cancer Center's first basic scientist and to establish Moffitt as a leader in research training.

"The day I accepted the job, my first condition was that a summer undergraduate research program I'd started with six students per summer at USF would be expanded at Moffitt," says Dr. Djeu. It immediately grew to as many as 30 undergraduate interns each summer, mentored by scientists throughout Moffitt.

Over the past 25 years, she says proudly, over 600 SPARK interns have gone on to study at great schools (Harvard, Columbia, Yale, Emory, Vanderbilt and others) and accomplish impressive things. "They'll get in touch and say - 'hey Dr. Djeu, do you remember me? I was in your SPARK program. You really set me up... Because of SPARK, now I'm a physician here at this institute - and I want to thank you for what you did for me.'"

What she did was open a door. SPARK interns like Evan Johnson chose to walk through and investigate career opportunities.

Now a USF pre-med senior, Johnson says he became very interested in medical research after his grandfather was diagnosed with lymphoma. "I have this personal connection," he says, "so research is something I'm very passionate about." Johnson was a junior when he reached out to Moffitt to see if there were any opportunities to learn firsthand as a volunteer. It wasn't long before he applied to become a SPARK intern working on a funded research project.

Current SPARK program director Doug Cress, Ph.D., explains the ten-week summer program is a "full-time immersion in research." Competition is tough for SPARK's limited slots, with hundreds of applicants. Interns study under some of the nation's leading scientists in Moffitt labs. Dr. Cress's Molecular Oncology lab is just one example, though interns may be mentored in such diverse programs as Drug Discovery, Experimental Therapeutics, or even prevention-related studies in Health Outcomes and Behavior. Each intern works with their mentor to create their own research project with achievable goals and present their findings in a scientific paper and oral presentation at Moffitt's annual Research Day.

For Johnson, the real thrill was learning technical research skills. "I'd learned about the DNA of a cancer cell in my undergraduate courses. Now, I had someone teach me how to actually look at that DNA firsthand."

He used those skills to continue his research project on proteins involved in cancer metabolism - it's now his senior USF Honors College thesis. Johnson is looking forward to starting medical school in August, knowing he'll already have valuable research experience under his belt. "Most medical schools have mandatory research components," he explains. "I can walk into a lab and know what I'm doing."

Once he has his M.D., Johnson says he won't give up his interest in research.

Mentoring future physician-scientists, says Dr. Cress, is the greatest reward of the SPARK program.

For Dr. Djeu, creating new ambassadors is Moffitt's reward. "I tell all my students when they leave - remember, this is not just a summer thing. You are our ambassadors. When people ask, tell them Moffitt inspired me." 📍

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SPARK interns Nick Gimbrone (center) and Evan Johnson confer with Dr. Cress.