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Blood Research Institute

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BRIghtLights

BRIghtLights is a quarterly newsletter published by the Versiti Blood Research Institute Foundation. Interested in learning more? Please contact the Foundation office: 414-937-6799.

BRIghtLights

Shining a light on research and discovery

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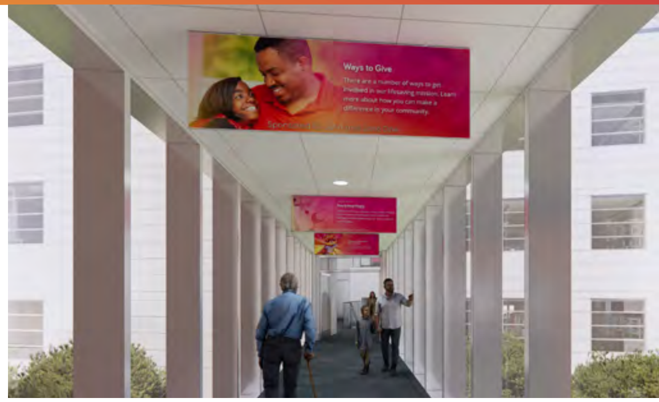
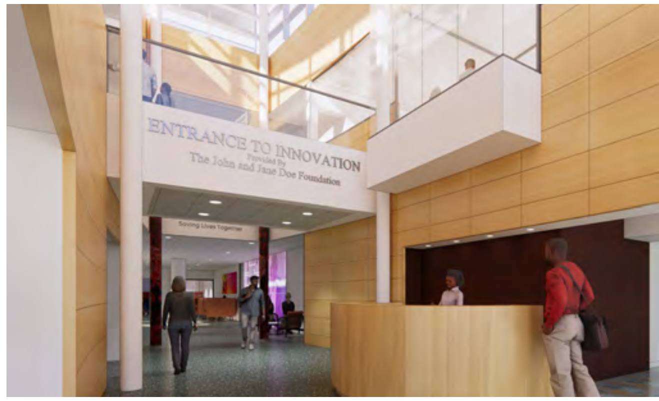
A Message from Chief of Staff and Vice President of Advancement Christine Sadowski



I'm writing to share that Versiti Blood Research Institute is moving forward with our building expansion project, which is currently on track to be completed by the end of next year.

The VBRI expansion includes features such as:

- **Innovation Bridge**: The connector bridge will further solidify the partnership between VBRI and the Medical College of Wisconsin and fuel patient care advancements.
- **Expansion Entrance**: Visitors will be welcomed to VBRI with a motion-activated video wall featuring stories that show how science translates into patient care.
- **Core Laboratories**: More spaces for genetic analysis, cellular work, and therapeutic development.



This 79,000-square-foot addition will nearly double the number of principal investigators at VBRI and make collaboration between scientists and doctors even easier. Long-term, increasing the size and capacity of Versiti Blood Research institute will have the biggest payoff for patients with blood disorders, cancers, and other diseases, as VBRI researchers work on improving standards of care and breakthrough therapeutics. This expansion brings hope and progress for the patients and families we serve.

With gratitude,

Christine Sadowski

Chief of Staff and Vice President of Advancement

Versiti Receives $2.7 Million Grant for Leukemia Research

Hope is gaining serious momentum at Versiti Blood Research Institute. The Pulikkan Lab, led by John A. Pullkian, PhD, secured a coveted, $2.7 million R01 grant from the National Institutes of Health. This significant funding will advance groundbreaking research into new treatment approaches for acute myeloid leukemia (AML), a rare, aggressive form of blood cancer.

The research focuses on AML with chromosome inversion 16, a genetic characteristic found in approximately 10% of AML cases. By understanding how these cancer cells survive and identifying their vulnerabilities, Pulikkan's work brings hope to patients facing limited treatment options.

"This grant allows us to accelerate our progress toward developing targeted therapies that address the unique biology of AML," Pulikkan says.

Pulikkan's innovative research identifies a previously unknown mechanism driving AML: the N-MYC/eIF4G1 pathway. This opens doors to entirely new therapeutic strategies. N-MYC is a protein typically associated with other cancers. Pulikkan's team discovered that N-MYC plays a crucial role in certain types of AML, too, and controls cancer cell survival through the regulation of protein synthesis.

"By targeting the fundamental processes that cancer cells depend on for survival, we're working toward therapies that could be more effective and less toxic than current options," Pulikkan explains. "This discovery represents a potential turning point for patients with specific forms of AML."

This exciting work doesn't just open doors to promising new strategies against AML. It also highlights VBRI's role as a leader in blood health research and reflects our commitment to investing in hope through rigorous scientific exploration. With support from the NIH, we're turning today's discoveries into tomorrow's breakthroughs.

Fighting Leukemia Together

Lily and Bailey Dove are sisters who share two special bonds: they're identical twins — and they both beat childhood leukemia. Lily was diagnosed first at 10 years old and Bailey followed a year and a half later. For Lily, completing two years of treatment was bittersweet. "I felt like the fight wasn't technically over," she says.

It wasn't until 2017, after more blood and platelet transfusions, that Bailey was cancer-free, too. "It felt amazing to finally be able to move on without having to go in for treatments," Bailey says. Today, the sisters are enjoying college life at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Lily is studying marketing and Bailey is planning a career as a speech pathologist.

Lily and Bailey's mom Erin is grateful that Versiti blood donors were there when her daughters needed them most. "Not only does Versiti help girls like mine… but there's a wider range of people that they're helping," she says.

At VBRI, scientists are working hard behind the scenes to find better, more effective treatments and therapies for children with leukemia. Sid Rao, MD, PhD, a VBRI investigator whose lab focuses on leukemia, says of VBRI's planned expansion, "I cannot think of another place in the world that really does it the way we do. Having more space will allow us to reach critical mass, especially for [scientists] who are focused on leukemia, allowing us to do more impactful research."

Save the Dates: Illuminate Gala and Ziegler Lecture

Versiti is shining a light on the power of scientific discovery with two fall events: Illuminate: A Night for Cures gala on Sept. 18, 2025 and the "How to Clone a Mammoth" Ziegler Innovative Research Lecture on Nov. 13, 2025.

Illuminate: A Night for Cures

Join us for Illuminate: A Night for Cures — a special evening that honors the dedicated investigators pushing the boundaries of research, the visionary donors who make progress possible, and the courageous patients who inspire each and every breakthrough.

Don't miss your opportunity to be part of this extraordinary night! (And join us for the Afterglow featuring DJ Shawna, too!)

Sept. 18, 2025
5:30–8:30 p.m.

Wisconsin Club
900 W. Wisconsin Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53233

Reserve your seat!

"How to Clone a Mammoth" with Dr. Beth Shapiro

You're invited to "How to Clone a Mammoth," a free lecture with world-renowned evolutionary biologist Dr. Beth Shapiro. She studies the ancient DNA of plants and animals from 130,000 years ago and examines how and why their genomes have changed over time.

The most exciting part? A better understanding of paleogenetics can inform groundbreaking work being done today in regenerative medicine.

Nov. 13, 2025
6:30–8 p.m.

Weasler Auditorium
1506 W. Wisconsin Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53233

Tickets available!

Community Beacon: Northwestern Mutual

45 Years of Partnership and Hope

In 1980, when Northwestern Mutual began organizing blood drives, few could have imagined the journey that would follow. What began as addressing local blood needs has evolved into collaborative discovery, as Northwestern Mutual's support helps fund the research that leads to better treatments. Since 1987, when our formal research partnership began with the first $10,000 pledge, we've embarked on a journey that exemplifies the Northwestern Mutual Foundation's mission to improve the lives of children and families in need. The numbers tell part of the story: $1.3 million in lifetime giving, nearly 29,000 blood donations, and transformative investments in core research infrastructure. But the true measure is in the discoveries these gifts have enabled, discoveries that bring us closer to the day when no parent has to hear the words "Your child has leukemia."

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