

## A Message from Chief of Staff & Vice President of Advancement Christine Sadowski

The Versiti community came together on Sept. 18 at the Wisconsin Club for our sold-out gala Illuminate: A Night for Cures. We raised more than \$400,000 to advance lifesaving blood health research at the Versiti Blood Research Institute.

Nearly 300 supporters joined us, including scientists, physicians, patients, donors, and special guest KiKi Shepard, who in addition to being a legendary television host, is a national sickle cell disease advocate. Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson also offered remarks via video message, reinforcing the vital role Versiti plays in the community's health and future.

Emceed by Judge Derek Mosley, whose personal transplant journey deeply connects him to Versiti's mission, the program highlighted the individuals whose dedication exemplifies the organization's commitment to discovery. Honorees included:

**Julia Syburg** received the Virginia Brooks Jefferson Award, Versiti's highest recognition of philanthropic and service leadership, honoring her 25-year tenure guiding the organization from the Blood Center of Wisconsin to its current national presence as Versiti.

**Zach Fechter** was presented with the Illuminate Award, recognizing the way he has transformed his lifelong journey with severe hemophilia A into passionate advocacy, championing awareness at state and national levels.

Gala funds directly support the Versiti Blood Research Institute Foundation, enabling Versiti scientists to pursue innovative blood health outcomes for patients with bleeding disorders, blood cancers, and transfusion medicine.

With gratitude,

*Christine Sadowski*

Chief of Staff and Vice  
President of Advancement



## Versiti Receives \$2.4 Million Grant for Platelet Production Research

Hervé Falet, VBRI investigator, was awarded an R01 grant from the National Institute of Health (NIH) to continue research into platelet production, specifically the integral relationship of platelet production and the protein PACSIN2.

“PACSIN2 plays a crucial role between membranes and the cytoskeleton,” said Falet. “The proposed research aims to deepen our understanding of the molecular mechanisms by which PACSIN2 regulates platelet production and function, and thrombus formation.”

This research could play a significant role in establishing better, more effective treatments for patients with life-threatening blood clots and related disorders.

Platelets are cell fragments that form blood clots and stop bleeding and are produced in bone marrow.

The work of Emily Boyd, a PhD candidate in the Falet Lab, contributed to the success of the grant, notably

during her time in the Chateaubriand Fellowship in France. Additional partners in this major award are the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) and the French Blood Establishment.

The \$2.4 million, multiyear NIH National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute grant runs until 2029 and reflects the NIH's confidence in the quality of the research being conducted at VBRI. Thanks to major investments like these, VBRI is advancing our understanding of medicine today in the name of better health outcomes for patients tomorrow.



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## Mentoring Other Kids with Hemophilia: Zach's Story

Weeks after he was born, Zach Fechter was diagnosed with severe hemophilia A, an incurable bleeding disorder that makes it difficult for blood to clot. Zach and his family were referred to the Versiti Comprehensive Center for Bleeding Disorders (CCBD) for medical care and support, where Zach's parents learned how to administer factor VIII product infusions more than 16 years ago. These injections replaced Zach's missing factor VIII protein and helped his blood clot.



“Zach learned how to do his own infusions around seven years old at our hemophilia summer camp,” Dr. Lynn Malec, CCBD hematologist and medical director, says. “There's been a lot of innovation in the hemophilia space over the last several years, and I think Zach's story really shows that.”

Zach's mom, Tracie Fechter, agrees. “Medication is growing leaps and bounds. I think about all of the research that has gone into every-other-day infusions when he was one-year-old, to every third day, to twice a week, to now once a week.”

Today, Zach is a varsity athlete on his high school's basketball team. He still returns to the hemophilia summer camp, only this time as a mentor to other kids. Dr. Malec says, “A lot of little boys at camp watch Zach take his own medicines, and then they want to learn to do their own first poke. He's an amazing mentor.”

Zach says, “[Having severe hemophilia] never stopped me from doing anything I wanted to.” He adds that his main hope for the future is that hemophilia treatment continues to improve, and infusions become even less frequent for patients. The research happening at VBRI, including Dr. Malec's work focusing on inhibitor development and factor replacement strategies, directly contributes to making Zach's vision for the future come true.

# Two New Associate Investigators Join VBRI

Versiti Blood Research Institute is thrilled to welcome Nicholas Jarjour, PhD, and Hongxu Xian, PhD, as associate investigators in Hematopoiesis and Immunology.



**Dr. Jarjour** is excited to start his own lab here at VBRI. “I’ve been working towards this for 15 years,” he says. “The opportunity to have an impact on other people who are training... That’s a feeling you don’t get very often. It was an easy decision to come to Versiti. The leadership and ecosystem of VBRI is a strong, stable place for the lab.”

His research explores the evolution of tissue-resident immunity: how immune cells (T cells and macrophages) living within organs support health, respond to disease, and adapt over time as the body changes. “If we can understand how to manipulate tissue-resident immune cells, maybe we can have better vaccines or make vaccines for things that are difficult to vaccinate against, like tuberculosis,” says Jarjour.



**Dr. Xian’s** first impressions of VBRI have been similar. “The people here are very open and supportive. It’s a good place to grow,” she says. Her research dives deep into how mitochondrial stress activates the immune system. “Mitochondria aren’t just the cell’s ‘powerhouse,’” she says. “When mitochondria are stressed, their DNA becomes oxidized and act like an alarm to the immune system. If that alarm keeps ringing, it drives disease. If we figure out how to keep this oxidized mitochondrial DNA in check, we may be able to prevent or better treat autoimmune and neurodegenerative disorders.”

## Invest in Innovation

As 2025 comes to a close, consider making a year-end donation to support groundbreaking research and patient care at Versiti.



# Community Beacon: Lenovo & AMD

As an organization formed from blood centers across the Midwest, Versiti inherited a wide range of technology with different software and hardware specifications. From the computers that make mobile blood collection efforts possible to the servers that allow researchers to analyze huge amounts of data, technology is behind everything Versiti does — and patients and researchers rely on it every single day.

That’s why our partnership with Lenovo has proven so vital. Together, we’ve replaced nearly all of our endpoint technology with optimized Lenovo solutions. Device management has also been seamless thanks to Lenovo providing device imaging, asset tagging, cloud recovery, and image management services. “Versiti is an organization that has strong correlation to AMD’s mission of driving innovation that positively impacts lives,” says Justin Galton, director of sales at Lenovo. “I’m very excited for the future together and enabling Versiti to be able to utilize research and data more centrally and effectively (with AMD Ryzen and AMD EPYC), as they drive leadership research and studies towards solving the diseases and ailments that impact so many of our lives.”

Backed by powerful Lenovo servers, AMD Ryzen processors, and Lenovo laptops and devices, Versiti’s researchers and clinicians can continue to push the frontiers of healthcare.





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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.