

# Profiles

## **Patricia Thomas, MA** **Health and Medical Journalism**

Journalism professor **Patricia Thomas** began her career writing about health, medicine and biomedical research 30 years ago in Atlanta, Ga., freelancing health news pieces and working as an editor for different publications aimed primarily for physician audiences.



**Patricia Thomas**

A staff job at the *Medical World News*, a national magazine for doctors, facilitated a move to Boston, Mass. Here she would eventually be selected for a Knight Science Journalism Fellowship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, become the first non-physician editor of the *Harvard Health Letter*, and write a book about the AIDS vaccine.

“Overall, I wrote for audiences we might describe as privileged consumers,” said Thomas. “Middle class and upper middle class people with health insurance, who were still worried about getting sick and still worried about how they would have to pay for it.”

Thomas returned to Georgia this August to focus her attention on quite a different audience. As the first holder of the Knight Chair in Health and Medical Journalism in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, her research and outreach efforts will focus on improving the flow of health news to the Southern Black Belt, a rural strip of hundreds of counties through 11 states.

For her first major project, Thomas is joining forces with Charles Haddad, director of the CDC Foundation Knight Journalism Fellowship program, to organize a 36-hour news briefing in February 2006 at a location in South Georgia. The “Gnat Line News

Briefing” will bring public health experts, physicians, biomedical researchers and health advocates together with reporters, editors and news directors from small-market broadcast and print outlets to talk about timely topics in health and medicine.

“I believe you have to take something like this to where these reporters are for it to be worth anything,” she said “These journalists work at publications and stations so small their bosses cannot spare them for very long.”

If the briefing proves to benefit community health awareness by influencing the sort of stories covered by the local media, Thomas hopes to use it as a prototype to create a “road show” that would take the same cast of speakers and move them from town to town through other southeastern states.

Thomas will also actively participate in health communication research already ongoing at UGA. She plans to assist journalism and speech communications professor **Vicki Freimuth** and the new Southern Center for Communication, Health and Poverty on an in-depth assessment of health literacy among low income populations in the South. In addition, Thomas will collaborate with Grady College colleagues **Jeff Springston**, associate professor of public relations, and **Lee Becker**, director of the Cox Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research, on a pilot study assessing health news coverage in small and underserved communities in rural Georgia.

Developing specialized courses in health and medical journalism also hold an important place on Thomas’ agenda.

“What I would like to see down the road is a way of training journalists to be better educated than I was,” said Thomas. “I think we need journalism students to take epidemiology, statistics and biology courses so that when they read scientific literature they don’t mistake an incremental advance for a breakthrough.”

Tapping into UGA’s strengths in journalism and the sciences, she hopes to create cross-training opportunities that would not only allow journalists to attain a higher level of scientific literacy, but provide scientists with the skills to communicate more effectively to the media and public.

The Knight Chair position, said Thomas, was created with the purpose of using the tools of journalism to improve the health

status of the poorest, most disenfranchised people in our country.

“It’s simply not right that insured people will outlive other individuals in the same age cohort by 10 or 15 years because of differences in education and access to prevention and medical care,” she said. “This position gives me a chance to try, in some tiny way, to address those problems.”

## **Walter Schmidt, PhD** **Biochemistry and Molecular Biology**

Although only a junior member of the biochemistry and molecular biology faculty, assistant professor **Walter Schmidt** is making an impact on UGA’s research endeavors in the biomedical and health sciences.

The main focus of Schmidt’s work is in cancer biology and it’s an area for which he has already been well-recognized. Schmidt was recruited in 2001 as one of five Georgia Cancer Coalition Distinguished Cancer Scientists at UGA and recently received a five-year \$825,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health for cancer research in collaboration with UGA chemistry assistant professor **Timothy Dore**.

The Schmidt laboratory studies the protease Rce1, an enzyme required for the maturation of certain oncoproteins. Ras, the most recognized of these oncoproteins, works as a molecular ‘on/off’ switch that can change the way cells grow and interact with other cells. Mutated forms of Ras that are locked in the ‘on’ position are found in about 30 percent of all human cancers.

Schmidt also studies the role of the protease IDE, or insulin degrading enzyme, in Alzheimer’s disease. IDE, in addition to degrading insulin, cleaves the neurotoxic amyloid-beta peptides that accumulate in the brain and increase the risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

Expanding this work, Schmidt and Georgia Tech associate professor **Yury Chernoff** were recently awarded a \$50,000 UGA/Georgia Tech inter-institutional grant to study connections between Alzheimer’s disease and prion diseases, such as mad cow disease.

“Overall, we are looking at the structure function analysis of these enzymes with the hope of being able to identify compounds that regulate the activities of these proteases in therapeutic ways,” he said.



**Walter Schmidt**

Schmidt's enthusiasm for research is mirrored only by his enthusiasm to share his unique perspectives and experiences with minority students interested in the sciences.

"It's not obvious from my name, but my mom is Mexican-American," said Schmidt. "I grew up exclusively in my mother's culture in a part of the country that is 95 per-

cent Hispanic."

Schmidt is a native of the southernmost borderlands of Texas, a region of the country where nearly 400,000 Spanish-speaking Americans live in unincorporated settlements that often lack basic water and sewer systems, paved roads and safe and sanitary housing. In communities here, Hispanics hold many prominent positions in education, government and business.

"As soon as I got to college, I realized things were different," he said. Schmidt found there were very few Hispanics, very few African Americans, and an even fewer number of faculty to serve as role models.

Despite these deficits, Schmidt tapped into the encouragement he received from faculty as an undergraduate at Rice University and the minority-focused environment that was flourishing at the University of California at Berkeley when he began graduate studies in molecular and cellular biology in 1989.

"It was very eye opening for me. And in part, I think that is what drove me to be an

academic," he said.

Support from various agencies, such as the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, the National Institutes of Health and the National Hispanic Scholarship Foundation, aided Schmidt throughout his bachelor's and doctoral studies. Schmidt wants to make students and faculty aware of these opportunities.

Schmidt maintains a webpage listing UGA opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students who are interested in the sciences. (Visit [www.biomed.uga.edu](http://www.biomed.uga.edu) for link.) The site gets about 150 unique hits per month, according to Schmidt, enough to show that minorities have a definite interest in programs at UGA.

"I think UGA has a wonderful reputation for granting PhDs to minorities, but in fields other than science," he said. "I'm just trying to advertise programs at UGA and trying to inform students that you can support your own graduate education. There are a lot of funding opportunities out there."

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## 2005 BHSI Retreat (cont.)

included a morning business session, luncheon social and afternoon poster session.

Morning talks provided BHSI faculty members with current information about BHSI programs and initiatives. Neuroscience Division Chair **Gaylen Edwards** spoke about the new neuroscience Ph.D. program and efforts to expand neuroscience across campus. **Robert Galen**, interim department head in health administration, biostatistics and epidemiology, presented an update on the College of Public Health. **Margie Lee**, professor of avian medicine, summarized UGA endeavors in disease ecology as well as efforts to spearhead a new initiative in the research field. New Vice President for Research **David Lee** also addressed the crowd.

The poster session featured research from thirty-nine UGA undergraduates, graduate students, post-docs, staff and faculty. Best poster awards worth \$250 were given to doctoral students **Daniel Baker** (biochemistry and molecular biology), **Richard Suplita** (neuroscience and behavior), **Heather Stephens** (foods and nutrition) and **Benjamin Hasselbring**

(microbiology). Suplita was also awarded this year's MCG/UGA Student Exchange Award for Excellence in Biomedical Research. He will receive an additional \$250 prize and travel to the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta during the spring semester to present a seminar on his research.



**BHSI Retreat Best Poster Award winners: (left to right) Baker, Suplita, Stephens and Hasselbring**

## UGA, Georgia Tech program awards \$200,000 in grants

UGA and the Georgia Institute of Technology have awarded four interinstitutional research teams a total of \$200,000 to conduct biomedical research and expand collaborative research between the two universities. The Georgia Tech/UGA Biomedical Research Program is administered by the Petit Institute for Bioengineering and Bioscience at Georgia Tech and the BHSI at UGA. The program will provide each research team with \$50,000 annually for a period of up to two years. The funded projects are as follows:

UGA	Georgia Tech	Collaborative Project
Richard Dluhy	Lawrence Bottomley	Viral Fingerprinting Using Enhanced Raman-Nanoforce Microscopy
Nancy Manley	J. Todd Streeleman	The Second Jaw of Cichlid Fishes: Solving the Molecular Code of Jaw Origins
Steven Stice	Todd McDevitt	A Biomaterials Approach to Eliminating Animal Product Contamination in Human Embryonic Stem Cell Culture
Walter Schmidt	Yury Chernoff	Regulation of Yeast Prion-like Phenotypes by Ste24 and M16 Family Protease