2022 Micah Batchelor Awards
Honors Distinguished Faculty

Since 2004, the Micah Batchelor Awards for Excellence in Children’s Health Research have honored some of the best and brightest physician-researchers at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine Department of Pediatrics. The awards, established through the extraordinary generosity of George E. Batchelor in memory of his late grandson, are presented each year to researchers conducting cutting-edge research in children’s diseases.


“We are extremely grateful to the Batchelor Foundation for their immense generosity as one of the University of Miami’s
largest donors, and their continued commitment to ensuring George’s vision of advancing children’s health lives on,” said Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School.

The presentation of the 2022 awards was held November 29 at the Batchelor Children’s Research Institute.

Glenn Flores, M.D., chair of the Department of Pediatrics and the George E. Batchelor Chair in Child Health, began by reading a quote from 1947 Nobel Prize winner Gerty Cori, who said, “The unforgotten moments of my life are those rare ones which come after years of plodding work, when the veil over nature’s secret seems suddenly to lift, and when what was dark and chaotic, appears in a clear and beautiful light and pattern.”

“In this spirit, we honor the fact that this year, for the second year in a row, the awards were presented to four outstanding female physician-scientists, each working to give new hope to families facing childhood illnesses,” said Dr. Flores.

‘Research Is the Key’

The award winners include Ruby Natale, Ph.D., Psy.D., who received the Micah Batchelor Award for Excellence in Children’s Health; Merline Benny, M.D., who received the Micah Batchelor Fellow award; and Jennifer Muñoz Pareja, M.D., and Aditi Dhir, M.D., M.B.B.S., each of whom received the Micah Batchelor Scholar Award.

“Research is the key to our understanding of human disease, said Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., director of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, executive dean of research at the
Miller School, and Oscar de la Renta Endowed Chair in Cancer Research. “Funding and support of our pediatric faculty awardees will pave the way for future discoveries and cures that particularly impact children and young adults.”

Dr. Natale is an associate professor of pediatrics and a pediatric and community psychologist at the Miller School’s Mailman Center for Child Development. Her research team continues to address critical gaps in the field by evaluating and implementing evidence-based services and programs to child care centers aimed at improving children's developmental trajectories.

“This award will allow us to fulfill an important need in the community, which is to improve early childhood resiliency and reduce problematic behaviors within early care and education centers through the use of a mobile app,” said Dr. Natale. “This is especially important for children of color living in communities that are significantly impacted by health and educational disparities. The mobile app is designed to reduce these disparities by increasing access to much-needed resources.”

Empowering Young Faculty

Dr. Benny is an assistant professor of pediatrics in the Division of Neonatology at the Miller School, and an attending neonatologist at Holtz Children’s Hospital. Her research focuses on inflammasomes and systemic vascular stiffness—studies that can potentially lead to crucial novel treatments for preventing arterial stiffness and cardiovascular diseases in pre-term birth survivors across their life span.
“Awards like this fuel young faculty with the resources necessary to pursue work that can translate into the clinical setting,” said Dr. Benny. “This award isn’t just for me. One day I hope to bring this research into the clinical practice to make a difference in the lives of the patients I take care of.”

Dr. Muñoz Pareja is a pediatric critical care attending physician in the Department of Pediatrics, where she is associate professor in the Division of Pediatric Critical Care. Accepting the award on her behalf was her co-primary investigator, Amanda Alladin, M.D., assistant professor of clinical research in the department.

“Winning this award means that we will be able to study the foundations of delirium in children to develop new therapies for an understudied and underrepresented patient population,” said Dr. Muñoz Pareja.

Dr. Dhir is an assistant professor of pediatrics in the Division of Hematology/Oncology at the Miller School and a pediatric hematologist-oncologist at Sylvester. Through the support of the award, Dr. Dhir is exploring new approaches to make cancer cells respond to chemotherapy and immunotherapy, and to find treatment combinations to improve survival for children and young adults with bone sarcomas.

The event was attended both virtually and in person by family, friends, colleagues, University leadership, and former recipients of the award.