



Brandeis University

Avital Rodal, PhD
Associate Professor of Biology
415 South Street, Mailstop 029
Waltham, Massachusetts 02453

5/28/2018

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Blais, and the Blazeman Warriors,

Five years ago, we first got to know the Blazeman Foundation when you generously agreed to support a postdoctoral fellow in my lab. I was only three years into running my own independent research program and working hard to get my lab off the ground. I had been writing for many years in my papers and grant proposals that the work we were doing was highly relevant to ALS, since we were studying the fundamental transport processes within nerve cells that promote neuronal growth and survival. However, we had only begun to directly test how these processes might go wrong in disease and did not have the resources or connections in the ALS field to really dive in and test our ideas. When you first contacted me, I was so pleased that you would take a chance on a young investigator with no record in ALS research, working at a small university with no medical school, and on fruit flies (a powerful animal model system but not always appreciated by many scientists). I had just received the NIH New Innovator award to further our studies of these fundamental transport processes, and your additional support gave us just the right boost to push our research in the direction of ALS. My impression after getting to know you over these five years is that taking these kinds of chances on people, and trying something novel, new and different reflects Jon's values and strengths.

As I was beginning to search for candidates for the postdoctoral fellowship, I had a transformative conversation with my colleague Suzanne Paradis, who works in mammalian models to study neuronal growth, synapse formation and function. We decided together that hiring the Blazeman Postdoctoral Fellow, to be jointly mentored by the two of us, would give this position the best of both worlds – the power, speed, and simplicity of the fruit fly system and the disease relevance of the mammalian system. We advertised the position together and after interviewing several excellent candidates, we met Dr. Mugdha Deshpande. She was an unconventional candidate in that her background was not in ALS research (she had done her Ph.D. in a learning and memory laboratory at Texas A & M), but her letters of recommendation were extremely strong and we connected immediately with her. We both felt that her genuine desire was to make important contributions to disease research, and that she had the rigor and skills to make it happen. Again, based on what you have told me, taking a risk on someone valuable and excellent like this seems like it might be what Jon would have done.

Looking back now, I am incredible grateful for all of the professional and personal growth that I have gotten through the support of the Blazeman Foundation. Together, we have published two nice papers and two review articles, with a few more papers in the works. We have trained Dr. Deshpande, who will soon go on to make more contributions to disease research as an independent scientist in industry, using the credentials and skills she acquired as the Blazeman Postdoctoral Fellow. Through supporting her, you have also supported her collaborations with two Ph.D. students (Zachary Feiger in my lab and Josiah Herzog in Sue's lab), as well as several undergraduates who have gone on to medical and graduate school with a deep appreciation of where we need to go with ALS research. Our ALS work was a very important component of my promotion package, and I was awarded tenure last year. I also

deeply appreciate all the important efforts you have made to create accessible patient tissue banks for researchers everywhere, including Jon's own personal sacrifice. I hope to be able to use these precious resources soon for own research. Most importantly, through our conversations and our connection to the Blazeman Foundation, we all have internalized the terrible toll this disease takes on patients, families, and friends, and the urgency and importance of the fight to cure ALS.

So, thank you deeply for all the work you have done to support our research and the development of the trainees in our lab, and for always reaching out personally to maintain our connection to your family and foundation. This has been a truly meaningful experience for me, both in terms of measurable outcomes in moving forward our understanding of the cell biology underlying ALS, and its direct positive impact on my career as a scientist, and on me as a human. Thank you for all the important and courageous work you are doing towards a cure for ALS.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Avital Rodal', with a stylized, cursive script.

Avital Rodal
Associate Professor of Biology