Florentine Rutaganira, PhD, who graduated from UC San Francisco’s Chemistry and Chemical Biology Program earlier this year, has been chosen as a Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Hanna Gray Fellow. UCSF postdocs James Nuñez, PhD, and Wendy Yue, PhD, were also named for the coveted fellowship.

HHMI’s Hanna H. Gray Fellows Program seeks to encourage talented early career scientists who have the potential to become leaders in academic research. In particular, the program aims to recruit and retain emerging scientists who are from gender, racial, ethnic, and other groups underrepresented in the life sciences, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Drs. Rutaganira, Nuñez, and Yue were three of 15 outstanding early career scientists chosen for the first group of fellows in this HHMI program. These recent PhD recipients will continue their training, in a wide range of life-science disciplines, as postdoctoral fellows at 11 institutions in the U.S.

Each fellow will receive up to $1.4 million in funding over eight years, with mentoring and
active involvement within the HHMI community. In this two-phase program, fellows will be supported from early postdoctoral training through several years of a tenure-track faculty position.

Rutaganira was previously honored with a Chancellor Diversity Award at UCSF in 2014, and in 2016 she helped found S4D, Scientists for Diversity, which continues to build community, advocate for mentorship, and promote discussion on topics that impact an increasingly diverse cohort of current and aspiring scientists. She was also a frequent volunteer in the Graduate Division, helping out with the Summer Research Training Program, recruitment and outreach events, and more.

“We’re very proud of Flora, to whom we owe so much,” said Graduate Division Dean Elizabeth Watkins. “The generous and long-lasting HHMI Fellowship could really be life-changing. This couldn’t have happened to a more inspiring person.”

Rutaganira will be joining Dr. Nicole King’s lab at Berkeley. Her faculty mentor at UCSF was Dr. Kevan Shokat, who said, “Flora is an amazing scientist, who as a graduate student worked to develop two drug candidates, one to treat Toxoplasmosis gondii and one a pan-antiviral by targeting a host lipid kinase. It is outstanding for one student to make such a big impact in two drug discovery projects. Perhaps more remarkably, Flora did this while devoting her considerable energy to many outreach activities on and off our campus. Whenever I have met with incoming graduate students over the last few years and mention Flora was in my lab, they immediately speak up with a special story about how lucky they were to meet her. I know she will do great things, and being recognized by the Hanna Gray Fellowship will be a further boost.”

UCSF is the home institution of two of the other new Hanna Gray Fellows, James Nuñez and Wendy Yue. Dr. Nuñez was a lead author on an important study on foreign DNA capture during CRISPR-Cas adaptive immunity at UC Berkeley, where he studied with Jennifer Doudna and earned his PhD in molecular and cellular biology. He has been working as a postdoc in Jonathan Weissman’s lab at UCSF since last summer. Dr. Yue, who started her postdoc in David Julius’s lab in October 2016, received her PhD in neuroscience at Johns Hopkins.

Read more about the Hanna Gray Fellowship on the HHMI website. Applications for the next award period are now being accepted.

(Photo of Rutaganira above and on home page by Alison Yin/HHMI.)

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