



**MMRI scientists discuss their American Heart Association-funded research grants  
*Dr. Maria Kontaridis and Dr. Luana Nunes Santos to give overview of their study  
of the connection between congenital heart defects and autism***

For immediate release

UTICA, August 26, 2021 - On January 1, **Maria Kontaridis, Ph.D.**, Executive Director and Gordon K. Moe Professor at the Masonic Medical Research Institute (MMRI), began a study that the American Heart Association funded, to understand the possible molecular links between heart and brain abnormalities. **Specifically, Dr. Kontaridis' lab is looking to see if there is a link between cardiac abnormalities (congenital heart defects) and autism.**

Shortly after Dr. Kontaridis received that \$300,000, three-year Transformational Project Award for her project, "The role of *PTPN11* mutations in autism and heart pathogenesis," **Luana Nunes Santos, Ph.D.**, a postdoctoral fellow in the Kontaridis Laboratory, received a diversity supplement award of \$133, 480 for two years from the American Heart Association. That grant promotes diversity and inclusion in the sciences.

**On THURSDAY, August 26, at 11 a.m. at MMRI, 2150 Bleecker St., Utica, Drs. Kontaridis and Nunes Santos will discuss the projects.** Masks are required and anyone unvaccinated will be required to wear two masks.

"This project would not have been possible without the support from the American Heart Association. I am grateful for the AHA's continuous belief not only in my research, but that of the entire Institute. Additionally, I am immensely proud to have Dr. Luana Nunes Santos on my team, to be her mentor and to witness her success trajectory and growth as a scientist," said **Dr. Kontaridis**.

"I am honored to have been awarded this grant from the American Heart Association and given the opportunity to continue working towards my dream. **As a woman in science who is also from South America, it means a lot to have this support. It is the first check on the list to one day becoming an independent scientist and have my own lab,**" said **Dr. Santos**.

"We never expected to have a child born with a congenital heart defect," said Lara Nash, whose 3-year-old son Beckett was born with Tetralogy of Fallot with Pulmonary Atresia and was a Red Cap Ambassador to America's Greatest Heart Run & Walk in 2021. "Beckett doesn't have autism, but we are grateful to the past research of the American Heart Association that has let him be the healthy and active little boy he is today. Dr. Kontaridis' and Dr. Santos' research will surely help other children, just as Beckett has been helped. It's also exciting that American Heart Association funding in our community today means scientific improvements for people far beyond Utica and the Mohawk Valley."

"Funding research is the cornerstone of the American Heart Association's work, and we have invested \$4.6 billion in research since 1949," said Jennifer Keida, a survivor of heart disease, president and CEO of Standard Insulating and member of the Board of Directors of the American Heart Association in the Greater Utica area. "Any of us who have been treated for cardiac or brain issues – heart attack or stroke – have been touched by the research of the American Heart Association. It's exciting to think what long-reaching effects the research being done right here in Utica will have. I'm proud that the American Heart Association is committed to expanding diversity and inclusion in the sciences. Congratulations to Drs. Kontaridis and Santos."

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### **About the American Heart Association**

The American Heart Association is devoted to saving people from heart disease and stroke – the two leading causes of death in the world. We team with millions of volunteers to fund innovative research, fight for stronger public health policies, and provide lifesaving tools and information to prevent and treat these diseases. The Dallas-based association is the nation’s oldest and largest voluntary organization dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke. To learn more or to get involved, call 1-800-AHA-USA1, visit [heart.org](http://heart.org) or call any of our offices around the country. Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

### **About the Masonic Medical Research Institute**

The Masonic Medical Research Institute (MMRI) is dedicated to scientific research that improves the health and quality of life for all. We strive to conduct high quality research aimed at developing a deep understanding of diseases and generating innovative cures and treatments. Founded by the Grand Lodge of Free & Accepted Masons of the State of New York, the MMRI embodies the masonic principles of relief, charity, and truth.

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