

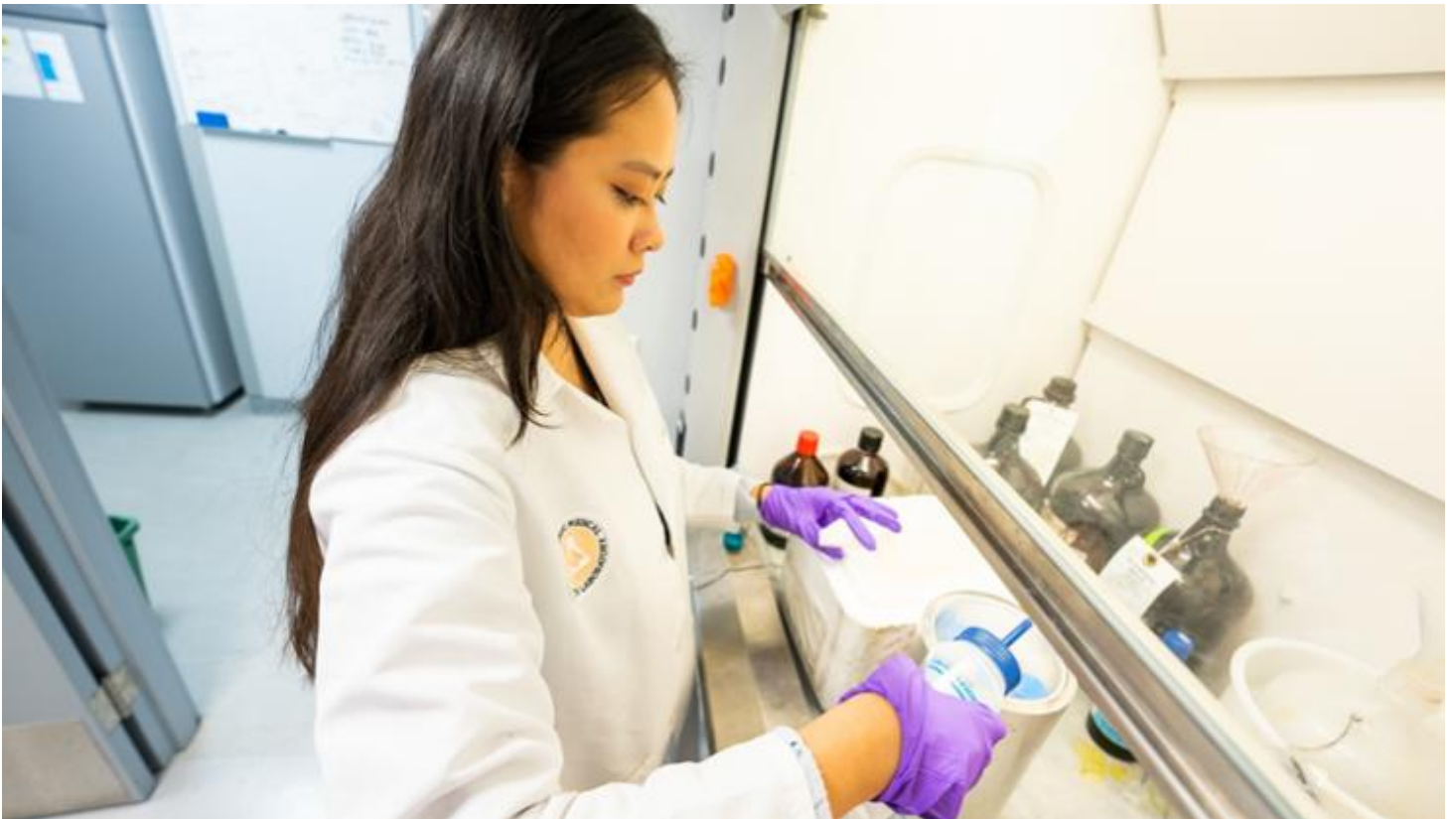
Hamilton

Thai '24 Conducting Lupus Research at Masonic Medical Research Institute

by [Claire Williams '25 \(/news/more-news?author=BC4C926B-8AEB-4326-8CC9C8196D0F3A35&name=Claire%20Williams%20%2725\)](/news/more-news?author=BC4C926B-8AEB-4326-8CC9C8196D0F3A35&name=Claire%20Williams%20%2725)

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Sandy Thai '24 works in a lab at the Masonic Medical Research Institute. Photo: Zack Stanek

As Sandy Thai '24 listened to the stories of patients from The Lupus and Allied Diseases Association, she felt inspired. She had spent the past few weeks researching the chronic autoimmune disease at the Masonic Medical Research Institute (MMRI), but hearing these people's stories put her work into perspective. Her research could have an impact outside of the scientific community. It could have an impact on the lives of the people in front of her, and that is an opportunity she is eager to have.

“The more I learn about lupus, the more passionate I become [to research it],” Thai said.

Lupus, like other autoimmune diseases, turns the body against itself. A person's immune system begins attacking healthy tissue, which, in the case of lupus, can cause inflammation and pain in any part of the body. The disease affects an estimated five million people worldwide, according to lupus.org.

“People's lives are completely altered because of this disease,” Thai said. “When I learned that 98% of people with lupus are women and that women of color are disproportionately affected by it, the more compelled I was to learn about it.”

Thai began researching lupus during her internship at the MMRI last summer. She was introduced to the position by the Young Scholars Program in Utica, which aims to motivate diverse and talented students to pursue higher education. Now, as a fellow at the institute, she is conducting her own research on potential treatments. An important aspect of her work requires her to use the institute's state-of-the-art flow cytometer, which can detect and measure physical and chemical properties of cells.

Scientists know little about lupus, including its cause, and current treatment options are not ideal, Thai said. She hopes that her research will add to the growing scientific knowledge of the disease. At the same time, she recognizes that her research may not produce the desired results. “Even if my project doesn't work out, I'm still grateful for the opportunities I've received,” she said. “It is such a great privilege to learn about the human body to this extent, to learn about lupus, and to learn from such brilliant scientists.”

One such scientist is Samantha Le Sommer, who has been Thai's supervisor and mentor since last summer. Sommer is a biologist at the institute and comes from a similar background as Thai: both lower income and first-generation students. "Being able to talk to someone [from my same background] who has achieved so much inspires me to believe that I can as well," Thai said.

Sandy Thai '24

Major: Biology

Hometown: Utica, N.Y.

High School: Thomas R. Proctor High School

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Thai's research will culminate in a "graduation" presentation, in which fellows present their research projects to friends and family. After her own college graduation, Thai plans to apply to medical school. "I was able to have an opportunity to research human concerns, and I've found I really enjoy research," she said. "Working in a lab like the Masonic Medical Research Institute has truly been a life-changing experience."

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