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U of L spinal injury research center gets federal grants

State's Bucks for Brains helped lure them

By **Laura Ungar**
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The Courier-Journal

Elizabeth Fust was not yet 40 when a spinal-cord stroke stole her ability to walk, dress herself and be the active person she had been.

"I was a perfectly healthy 38-year-old," said Fust, a Louisville attorney. "Then, instantly, I'm paralyzed."



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In the two years since, she's gradually regained control of her torso and more of her independence through therapy at Frazier Rehab Institute. And yesterday, she came to the University of Louisville to support researchers announcing they had received millions of federal dollars that could help people like her in the future.

Researchers at U of L's Kentucky Spinal Cord Injury Research Center received three grants from the National Institutes of Health totaling \$4.7 million that they hope will lead to new therapies for people with spinal-cord damage and conditions such as stroke and Alzheimer's disease.

The researchers also earned a \$300,000 grant from the Frankfort-based Kentucky Spinal Cord and Head Injury Research Trust. U of L officials said the NIH grants came at a time when federal research money is shrinking, and only one out of 10 grants gets funded.

"Louisville is successfully competing for these grants," Fust said. "I'm deeply proud we have this caliber of research in my hometown."

Officials said the grants reflect the success of the state's Bucks for Brains program, which matches state funds with money raised by universities to build endowments that pay researchers' salaries. Scott Whittemore, scientific director at the spinal cord center, and Dr. Theodore Hagg -- two of the researchers who earned the grants announced yesterday -- were hired through Bucks for Brains.

Started by former Gov. Paul Patton, Bucks for Brains created hundreds of positions -- which are maintained through endowments -- but after 2003 the legislature stopped appropriating funds, money that could be used to help create new positions.

Last month, Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, said the state may not be able to put more money into the program. Attempts to reach Williams yesterday were unsuccessful.



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Sujata Saraswat, a research associate, worked yesterday with spinal cord tissue sections at the University of Louisville's Kentucky Spinal Cord Injury Research Center. The center received three grants from the National Institutes of Health totaling \$4.7 million. (Photos by Michael Hayman, The Courier-Journal)

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University of Louisville President James Ramsey said: "We think the key to our future is investment in people. We've got to have more Bucks for Brains."



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From left, Larry Biven, Elizabeth Fust and David Allgood, all of

Gov. Steve Beshear's budget, which has not yet been approved, includes \$60 million for Bucks for Brains. U of L President James Ramsey said his university would receive about \$16 million of that.

"It's a program that's having a profound impact on our citizens -- in our community, our state and, really, worldwide, too," Ramsey said. "At U of L, we think the key to our future is investment in people. We've got to have more Bucks for Brains."

Fust agreed.

"I think it's a phenomenal success and a boon to our community," she said. "Bucks for Brains is showing dividends. If Kentucky's going to be a place for excellence, we have to take the long view."

Research goals

The grants fund research that scientists said they hope to take from the laboratory to the bedside.

Whittemore, who holds the Dr. Henry D. Garretson chair in spinal cord and head injury research, is principal investigator for a five-year, \$1.6 million grant to conduct research using genetically engineered mouse cells to regrow myelin, the [insulation](#) around nerve fibers that allows nerves to conduct signals between the brain and limbs, and brain and spinal cord.

Qilin Cao, one of Whittemore's collaborators, was given another \$1.6 million for research encouraging adult stem cells to regenerate myelin-producing cells in rats -- which could fight the formation of scar tissue after spinal-cord injuries.

Someday, officials said, Cao and Whittemore's work might lead to a treatment for multiple sclerosis.

Hagg, endowed chair in neurological surgery, was awarded more than \$1.5 million to examine how certain drugs boost neuron regeneration in an adult's brain. His research involves using drugs based on very small molecules that can be introduced into the nervous system and stimulate new brain cells or insulation for nerve cells.

This work could help victims of spinal-cord injury as well as stroke, Huntington's Disease, Alzheimer's disease and Lou Gehrig's disease.

After officials talked about this research at the news conference, several in the audience applauded their work. Some were potential beneficiaries. Nationally, spinal-cord injury affects about 250,000 people, and about 11,000 people sustain spinal-cord injuries each year.

Among them is Larry Biven, a 52-year-old Louisville man who became a quadriplegic three years ago after a car wreck.

"I'm excited about it," Biven said of the research, describing U of L as "a top-flight university and research program."

Bucks for Brains credited

U of L spokeswoman Ellen de Graffenreid called the spinal-cord injury research center "the house that Bucks for Brains built."

"I wouldn't be here without it," Whittemore said, standing in his laboratory after the news conference.

Whittemore came to the university in 1998, and his center now includes 10 faculty members.

Overall, Ramsey said, \$8.6 million from private donors has been matched by \$6 million from Bucks for Brains over the past six years -- and more than three times that amount has been awarded in additional funding.

"The [return on investment](#) now tops \$47.1 million," Ramsey said. "Thanks in large part to Bucks for Brains, our Department of Neurological Surgery is seventh in the nation in terms of NIH funding."

Williams, speaking last month at Greater Louisville Inc.'s Capitol Connection luncheon, said the budget priority for universities should be to fund their operating budgets.

"In the present circumstance we find ourselves, I think we're going to have to work hard to keep baseline funding for universities and elementary and secondary education," Williams said, according to a Courier-Journal article. Bucks for Brains "might be something we have to put off for the future."

whom have suffered spinal cord damage, attended the news conference announcing grants for the Kentucky Spinal Cord Injury Research Center at the University of Louisville. By Michael Hayman, The Courier-Journal

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But David Allgood, who became a quadriplegic after diving into a backyard pool at 16, said it should be a priority now.

"We are privy to some of the cutting-edge research in the world on spinal-cord injury," said the 42-year-old Louisville man, adding that a growing number of Kentuckians will benefit if the program thrives and grows.

A spinal-cord injury "is only one car wreck or one fall away," he said. "It can happen to anyone."

Reporter Laura Ungar can be reached at (502) 582-7190.

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