

# Out Toxicologists and Allies

Special Interest Group of SOT



Dear Out Toxicologists and Allies (OTA) Members,

First and foremost, happy PRIDE month to you all! With each year that passes I am more aware of how important it is to take the time to celebrate PRIDE month together, in our families, in our communities, but also within our professional communities. I hope you can find a way to celebrate that feels safe and uplifting in these uncertain times.

As I embark on this next year as the new President of OTA, I am standing on the shoulders of OTA Past President GIANTS. I find myself reflecting on some of the early days of OTA: before the close of the 2019 annual meeting in Baltimore, a core group of us (many of which are now past presidents of OTA) recognized that the 2SLGBTQIA+ community was an underserved demographic within SOT and we committed to taking action. Just six days after the meeting ended in 2019, we had our first meeting together to discuss how to establish such a group for our community.

I remember thinking that spring of 2019 that this was one of the most exciting developments of my early career. My science and research of course were top tier priorities for me, and still are. Becoming a high-quality educator, absolutely important to me then and now. But creating a safe space for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community within the Society of Toxicology, that felt monumental in terms of how my contributions could have a long-term impact. That first year in 2020, we had just over 20 members. Two years later in 2022 we were up to 100, and today in 2026, we stand at just over 160 members of OTA representing 30 states and 4 countries. Looking forward, one of the more exciting conversations we have been having with SOT Council has been focused on holding future Annual Meetings in states where the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is safe and welcomed.

DEI-related change can sometimes feel like it moves at the pace of molasses in a Northern Minnesota January. But seven years later, the long view I have makes one thing clear: what we have built together is big, important, and far beyond what many of us imagined was possible back in 2019.

One of my goals this year is to continue the work of the leaders that came before me and focus on making sure that OTA provides members with opportunities for networking and training in a supportive and fun environment. If you haven't participated in OTA activities previously, I encourage you to reach out to me or other OTA Board members to get involved. The OTA Board already has its sights on activities for SOT's 66th Annual Meeting in San Antonio. To that end, mark your calendars to submit abstracts from August 17th - November 13, 2026, which will be here before we know it. We also have some OTA award deadlines to keep on your radar: a Graduate Student Achievement Award, a Postdoctoral Fellow Achievement Award, and a Mentoring Award. These awards are due January 3rd, the application process is fairly simple, please apply and nominate your favorite mentor!

I am honored to be part of SOT and most importantly, to be part of OTA. I look forward to providing you with further reason to be part of OTA, and I want every single member of OTA to know they are an important part of the OTA community.



Sincerely,  
Sarah Lacher (*she/her*), PhD  
President, OTA 2026-2027

Associate Professor, University of Minnesota Medical School  
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# Spring '26 Newsletter

## *Table of Contents*

OTA E-Board Fall Elections .....	3
Celebrating our OTA Members .....	4
2026 OTA Award Winners .....	5
SOT 2026 Annual Meeting Recap.....	6
OTA Fundraising 2026 and 2027.....	7
New OTA Executive Board Member Spotlight .....	8-11
Financial Report .....	12
Closing Remarks .....	13



# ***OTA Executive Board 2026 Elections!***



Please consider running for officer positions on the OTA E-Board! This Fall for our 2027 elections, we'll be seeking candidates for the following roles:

- ***Vice President-Elect***
- ***Junior Councilor***
- ***Postdoctoral Representative***
- ***Graduate Student Representative***

Now is surely the time to contribute to OTA's future.

The sustainability and vitality of our organization depends on engaged members stepping into leadership.

Thank you for being part of OTA and for any way you can serve and support it in the crucial years ahead.

Email Sarah Lacher for more information:

[selacher@umn.edu](mailto:selacher@umn.edu)

# Celebrating our OTA Members



Happy PRIDE month everyone! We recognize that many in our community are navigating personal and professional circumstances that feel uniquely challenging and, in many ways, more difficult than many of us have faced before. We hope you are able to celebrate PRIDE in a way that feels safe, meaningful, and right for you, your families, and your communities.

We would like to feature the accomplishments of you, our OTA membership in a future newsletter.

**If you could please share with us any recent awards, publications, grants, promotions, presentations, or other professional accomplishments in 2026 [using this Google form.](#)**

# Congratulations to the 2026 OTA Award Winners!

## 2026 Graduate Student Achievement Award: Catherine Lucey, Columbia University

Catherine's research is focused on understanding cardiovascular health risks and improving exposure assessment of toxic metal(oids). Her research has been recognized for its innovation and quality through the Association of Clinical and Translational Science Blue Ribbon Award and by an NIEHS "Paper of the Month" designation. Cat has demonstrated a commitment to DEI by serving as leader of the doctoral student club and as Graduate Student Rep for OTA, as well as organizing student-led seminars.



## 2026 Postdoctoral Achievement Award: Brittany Rickard, PhD, NC State University

Dr. Rickard's research is focused on investigating mechanisms of PFAS-induced chemoresistance in ovarian cancer. Dr. Rickard has published 17 articles in this area (12 first-author) and one book chapter. Her research efforts have been recognized by receipt of the Dean's Distinguished Dissertation Award, North Carolina Impact Award, American College of Toxicology Travel Grant, and SOT NEXT Award. She has demonstrated a commitment to DEI by mentoring LGBT+ students through cancer and toxicology-focused training programs.



**2026 Mentoring Award: No applications!**

**Please nominate your mentor in 2027!**

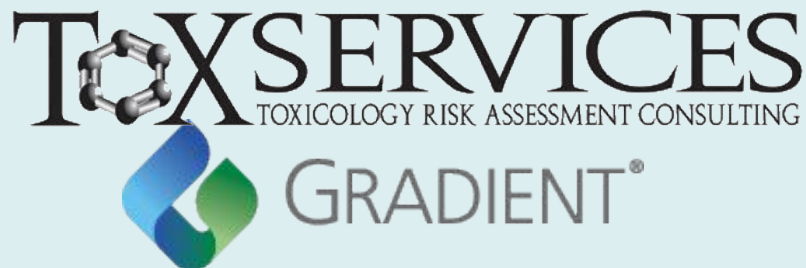
# SOT 2026 Annual Meeting Recap

This past March, the 65th SOT Annual Meeting and ToxExpo was held in San Diego, California. We kicked off the meeting with the annual OTA reception on Sunday evening at Garage Kitchen & Bar!

At the reception, we heard from Leo Cartier, the Individual Giving Officer of the [San Diego LGBT Community Center](#). The Center is a local San Diego nonprofit that works to enhance and sustain the health & well-being of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, nonbinary, immigrant, and HIV communities in San Diego. They provide many services to the community, including providing mental health resources, offering HIV and STI screenings, aiding in food and housing security, and facilitating support groups. OTA membership raised **\$615** for the San Diego LGBT Community Center at the reception this year! Thank you so much to those of you who donated!

Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude to all of the OTA donors and sponsors whose generosity helped make the 2026 annual reception such a success. Support from both individual OTA members and long-standing sponsors continues to create a welcoming and inclusive space for our community to connect and celebrate together. This year's venue was especially accommodating and accessible, with TVs and AV systems available across two floors so attendees could comfortably spread out while still clearly hearing the announcements and awards. OTA's annual reception is made possible in large part through the generous support of Gradient and ToxServices, longstanding supporters of the OTA reception for the past five years.

**Contributions from our members and sponsors are what make this event possible — THANK YOU!!!**





## 2026 OTA Fundraiser



# The San Diego LGBT Community Center



At the 2026 reception, OTA raised **\$615** for the San Diego LGBT Community Center! The San Diego Community Center is **one of the largest LGBTQ community centers in the nation**, providing the San Diego LGBT community with **over 84,600** direct service visits each year!

**THANK YOU** OTA members for your generosity!



## 2027 OTA Fundraiser



# Thrive Youth Center, San Antonio, Texas



Founder Sandy Whitley began by meeting and helping homeless LGBTQ+ youth under bridges and highways - **Thrive Youth Center** is now a full-service organization providing emergency shelter, transitional housing, counseling, connection to healthcare, education, and workforce support for LGBTQ+ youth ages 18-24.

Over 1,000 young people in San Antonio have been helped by Thrive since it began in 2015, and in 2025, over 14,000 housing and shelter services were provided - **WOW!**

***Stay tuned for information on our fundraiser for Thrive!***

# OTA Executive Board Spotlight: Cassie Meakin, PhD, DABT (she/her) Gradient



## What was your path to becoming a toxicologist?

I discovered toxicology while working on an environmental biodiversity program in North Queensland, Australia. I became fascinated by the intersection of science, medicine, and the environment, which ultimately led me to pursue environmental toxicology. Toxicology turned out to be the perfect blend of my interests as it allows me to apply science to real-world health questions while maintaining a strong connection to the environment that first inspired me.

## How would you explain the importance of toxicology to a layperson?

I always come back to the classic toxicology principle: the dose makes the poison. Most people can relate to that idea, whether it's caffeine, sunlight, or even water. Once people realize that nearly everything can be harmful or safe depending on the amount and circumstances, toxicology starts to feel much more relevant to everyday life. At its core, toxicology helps us understand how substances interact with our bodies and environments so we can make informed decisions that protect human and environmental health. It's a science that touches nearly every aspect of our lives, from the medicines we take to the products we use and the environments we live in.

## Outside of toxicology, how do you spend your time?

You can usually find me reading fantasy novels, experimenting with a new baking recipe, working on an interior design project, or spending time outdoors with my partner and our Finnish Lapphund. I love hobbies that balance creativity and curiosity, whether that means getting lost in a good book, tackling a home project, or exploring a new trail. They're a great way to recharge and often inspire the same sense of wonder and discovery that first drew me to science.

# OTA Executive Board Spotlight: Eli Cowan (he/him) Oregon State University



## What was your path to becoming a toxicologist?

I started interning in a Army Corps of Engineers zebrafish toxicology lab back home in Mississippi during the summer between high school and college. I'd never even heard of toxicology before this, and was just happy to be getting any sort of lab experience, but over that summer I absolutely fell in love with the discipline and with the zebrafish model. I continued interning at that lab throughout my summers in college, and when I started becoming interested in going to graduate school, I knew I wanted to go into a toxicology program and continue using the zebrafish model in my graduate research, which is how I ended up in my current position as a PhD candidate at Oregon State University.

## How would you explain the importance of toxicology to a layperson?

Toxicology is important because we're surrounded by chemicals in our everyday lives, and new ones are being created all the time. While many of these chemicals improve our lives, it's also important to understand whether they could also have unintended effects on our health. Toxicologists help answer those questions by studying how chemicals affect living organisms and identifying potential risks before they become widespread problems.

## Outside of toxicology, how do you spend your time?

I'm a trivia shark! I played quizbowl competitively when I was in college, but these days this mostly looks like bar trivia Tuesdays with a team of other grad students from my program. I'm also a self-proclaimed "film bro" and enjoy frequenting my local movie theater's "crappy sci-fi nights."

# OTA Executive Board Spotlight:

## Joe Jilek, PhD, DABT (he/him)

### Labcorp - Madison



#### What was your path to becoming a toxicologist?

Long story! My first job out of college was as a study tech at MPI (company name is dating myself). I was eyeing what the Study Directors did, so I returned to school to complete my MS in tox and expedite my career. That 2-year endeavor turned into nearly a decade scratching my academic itch. The year 2021 brought me full circle, as my partner had to move to Madison for work. The universe was listening (i.e., Covance was looking for SDs), and I was hired as a tox Study Director. In this role I work with a ton of Sponsors, all the dose routes, and learned how to run inhalation and CNS dosing studies. Labcorp supported my DABT pursuit in 2022 (s/o to all recertifying this year!), studying was a great exercise in reviewing the practice of toxicology - highly recommend to all interested! Most recently, I stepped into management, where I now lead a team of 8 SDs.

#### How would you explain the importance of toxicology to a layperson?

Everything we're exposed to (whether on purpose or accidentally - natural or synthetic) can be dangerous at the wrong dose. The goal of toxicology is to determine what that dose level is and what toxicity looks like. Toxicology informs how to mitigate risks due to chemical exposure, protect clinical trial volunteers, and safely get new therapies to patient populations.

#### Outside of toxicology, how do you spend your time?

I feel incredibly fortunate that my job brought me to Madison - this is truly the best small city in the US! When it's warm enough, I spend a lot of time on my bike and enjoying patio season. I've also learned to enjoy the winter, we live by a fantastic city pond so I've taken up skating. I also love to cook and recently bought a pizza oven (if anyone can coach me through making dough that would be great...!) You can also find me fixing/trying to improve something in our 125+ year old house, although I've learned I may be better suited for toxicology than DIY-ing.

# OTA Executive Board Spotlight:

## Jeff Willy, PhD (he/him)

### Vertex Pharmaceuticals



#### What was your path to becoming a toxicologist?

My path to toxicology was anything but planned. As an undergraduate, I pursued dual degrees in Molecular Genetics and Music Performance. At the time, I fully expected to pursue a career in music. While waiting to start graduate school, I accepted a position in pharmacology at Eli Lilly, thinking it would be temporary. Instead, I discovered a passion for biomedical research and drug development, which ultimately led me to a position in Toxicology. Nearly twenty years later, I've learned that some of the best opportunities in life are the ones you've never planned for. While it's important to pursue your goals with passion, it's equally important to remain open to unexpected opportunities and paths that may lead somewhere even better.

#### How would you explain the importance of toxicology to a layperson?

I usually tell people that I help make sure new medicines are safe. We start very early in drug discovery, helping scientists understand whether a new drug idea could have safety challenges and how those risks might be reduced. As a medicine progresses, we put it through increasingly rigorous testing to identify any potential concerns before it reaches clinical trials. Ultimately, our job is to ask tough questions early so that patients don't have to face unexpected problems later.

#### Outside of toxicology, how do you spend your time?

Outside of work, I spend my time pursuing two hobbies that don't naturally belong together: international travel and independent filmmaking. I studied music performance in college, so maintaining a creative outlet is important. I write, produce, and act in independent films, many of which focus on LGBTQ+ characters and experiences. I love the process of creating and broadening representation on screen. I am also passionate about travel and am always planning my next adventure.

## Financial Report:

Item	Amount
2026 Pre-meeting Balance	\$8013
2026 Meeting Expenses <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Postdoc award (\$500)</li><li>• Graduate student award (\$500)</li><li>• Graduate Rep Travel (\$350)</li><li>• Plaques (\$150)</li><li>• Mentoring Event (\$100)</li><li>• Reception Expenses (\$5408)</li></ul>	\$7008
Post 2026 Meeting Balance	\$1,005
2026 Incoming Membership Dues	\$2,415
2026-2027 Balance	\$3,420

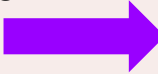
With annual dues generating approximately \$2,400 and meeting expenses nearing \$7,000:

**OTA needs to raise ~ \$4,500 annually to hold our annual reception.**

Of course, building a long-term reserve would help ensure we can continue hosting our annual reception without the need for yearly fundraising.

A practical intermediate goal would be to raise approximately \$15,000–\$25,000 over several years to establish a financial reserve that could substantially reduce, though not eliminate the need for annual fundraising.

### Donate to OTA

- You can easily donate directly to OTA by check or credit card by filling out this [form](#) or use the QR code. 
- Donations are tax deductible!
- Consider asking your employer to donate!



Please email the amount of your donation!  
[outtoxicologistsandallies@gmail.com](mailto:outtoxicologistsandallies@gmail.com)

# Closing Remarks:



Over the past seven years OTA has grown in amazing ways. At the same time, OTA also stands at a moment of transition. As our field, institutions, and professional landscapes continue to evolve, so too may the needs and priorities of our OTA membership. We are especially eager to hear from newer members, trainees, and early-career professionals about what matters most to them now.

- How can OTA best support your career development, mentorship, professional visibility, and long-term success?
- What kinds of programming, networking, and advocacy would be helpful to you in your career?

OTA has always been strongest when shaped by the voices of its members. Whether you have been with us since the beginning or are just finding your place in this community, your perspective is important. **We remain committed to fostering a visible, inclusive, and critically engaged network of 2SLGBTQIA+ toxicologists and allies.** We invite you to help shape what comes next.

We always welcome new ideas, fresh energy, and broader participation. Please consider becoming more involved, encourage a colleague or trainee to join, volunteer for a committee or leadership opportunity on the OTA executive board, or contribute financially (donations of any size truly make a difference).

**We also encourage you to help spread the word about OTA and invite fellow Society of Toxicology members, including allies who support our mission, to become members and help strengthen our community. For a SIG of our size, even a \$20 annual membership fee has a meaningful impact and directly supports our programming, mentorship, and community-building efforts.**

We are especially excited to welcome members interested in taking on more formal roles in helping guide OTA's future priorities and direction. Together, we can ensure OTA continues to grow in ways that meaningfully support our community.

***Stay connected with us  
and each other. Show up.  
Speak up. This work only  
moves forward if we  
move it together.***

Sarah Lacher (she/her): President  
Cody Smith (he/him): Vice President  
Jeffrey A. Willy (he/him): VP-Elect  
Ashley Brinkman (she/her): Senior Councilor  
Cassandra Meakin (she/her): Junior Councilor  
Joseph Jilek (he/him): Secretary Treasurer  
Drake Phelps (he/him): Postdoc rep  
Eli Cowan (he/him): Graduate student Rep  
Meg Whitaker (she/her): Past President