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Governors State Alumni Help Create COVID Vaccine

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Governors State Alumni Help Create COVID Vaccine

As the world eagerly watches the historic COVID-19 vaccine roll out, at least two scientists say they are grateful to [Governors State University](#) for preparing them for work on the vaccine frontlines.



Benjamin Rycraft, a 2020 [Bachelor of Science in Chemistry](#) graduate, and Ravikiran "Ravi" Yerabolu, who received a [Master of Science in Analytical Chemistry](#) in 2012, serve on teams that created and produce the vaccines at Pfizer Pharmaceutical and Moderna, respectively.

The two bio-tech firms have been exclusively authorized by the FDA to disseminate their products in hopes of slowing the steady march of deaths caused by the coronavirus, which has claimed more than 400,000 American lives since March 2020.

Rycraft, originally from Homewood, went to work as a Biological Operations Operator with Pfizer shortly after finishing his bachelor's degree at Governors State in May.

Ironically, the university was forced to delay commencement because of COVID, creating the perfect opportunity for him to relocate to Pfizer's Michigan headquarters.

Now the same virus is creating opportunities and rewards Rycraft could have never imagined. "Some days it does still feel surreal that I am a part of something this monumental," Rycraft said. He said the university's American Chemical Society certified degree, as well as hands-on instruction, prepared him for his work on the Pfizer Production team to help heal the world.



Yerabolu agrees. He completed his master's in Analytical Chemistry in 2012 and followed in the footsteps of his mentor Governors State Professor [Walter Henne](#)—himself a Governors State graduate.

Both Drs. Henne and Yerabolu completed their doctorates at Purdue and went on to work analyzing disease-fighting drugs. While Henne worked in a hospital researching cancer therapies; Yerabolu joined Moderna, then a bio-tech start up.

As a scientist there, Yerabolu said he's part of an analytical development team that supports the development of mRNA vaccines and therapeutics.

Now, witnessing the life-saving power of the vaccine, Yerabolu said he's grateful to Governors State, which offered him a place to explore his fascination with analytical chemistry that he first discovered growing up in India.

With chemistry, Yerabolu is solving problems for humanity, he said. "I always wanted to contribute something to the world, and I feel so blessed to be part of this."

Both students called Dr. Henne a fierce supporter and a resource who pushed them to excel. He has written letters of recommendation for the young scientists. Henne said he knew they were special from the beginning.

“I assumed they would do great things,” he said. “But who knew they would be involved in one of the most significant scientific event of the last 100 years?”