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APRIL 24, 2013 AT 1:00 AM

Ingrid Jacques

For Wayne State scientist, the brain is a work of art

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Wayne State researcher Moriah Thomason is doing groundbreaking work on brain connectivity in fetuses. (Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News)

Moriah Thomason is youthful, tall and elegant, and she talks about her research as if she were the curator at a world-class museum instead of a developmental neuroscientist at Wayne State University.

"It's really beautiful," she says, admiring the brain scans that are hung artfully in a few rooms of the Freer House on the WSU campus, where Thomason is also an assistant professor of pediatrics. The scans are intricate, with a rainbow of colors highlighting the inner workings of the mind.

The setting is a fitting place for Thomason's offices, since Charles Freer, who built the house in 1892, was an ardent art collector, and he designed the home to showcase his collection.

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Thomason is doing groundbreaking research on brain connectivity in fetuses and children. Her research, which has the potential to lead to better understanding — and future treatment — of a range of conditions, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism and depression, is funded in large part by a grant from the National Institutes of [Health](#).

NIH has not been immune from the criticism heaped on federal spending since the sequestration cuts went into effect in March. It drew notable derision for funding a \$1.5 million study into why lesbians are overweight.

But the fetal brain research Thomason is directing at WSU is an example of government spending at its best. It's an investment that could change lives, and in the long run save the [health care system](#) a great deal of money.

While much of the science Thomason talks about is over my head, her passion for her research is contagious. And the breakthroughs she's hunting for are easy to understand.

For instance, many of the expecting mothers Thomason sees as part of the WSU project are depressed — about 28 percent, which is much higher than average. A mother's depression can influence a child's chance of depression as well.

"These children will have problems," Thomason says. "They are Detroit kids."

The more scientists know about how a baby's brain develops in the womb, the better they'll be able to detect when things go wrong. Thomason says this means opportunity for prevention and treatment, since early intervention leads to better outcomes.

"It's really exciting and wonderful to think about," she says.

In February, Thomason's innovative research appeared in Science Translational Medicine, a journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. She scanned the brains of 25 fetuses between 24 and 39 weeks, which is no easy task. She used functional magnetic resonance imaging to map the connections between various areas of the brain.

An editor's summary of the report states that Thomason's work provides a foundation that "can serve as a starting point for research in this field."

This research is a collaboration between Wayne State's medical school and NIH, which houses its Perinatology Research Branch at the university. NIH chose this location in 2002 because of Detroit's high number of pre-term births; and the agency recently announced it would renew the university's contract for another 10 years.

Matt Lockwood, communications director at Wayne State University, says this is the only such lab in the country and the university is pleased the contract was renewed. "We're proud of it," he says.

They should be. The prospect of warding off some increasingly common disorders in children is priceless. The Wayne State contract is worth \$165.9 million, making it the university's largest research contract.

But Thomason is not proprietary about her research. This area of science, she says, is "so unknown" she wants to [share](#) what she's learned with researchers around the world. And they are already taking notice. "The best outcome is to share the tools," she says. "It's a high priority for me."

She has continued scanning the fetuses, and has overseen 100 MRIs of pregnant Metro Detroit women. Thomason also follows up with as many of



Thomason, left, plays with 3-month-old Luca Bender, a program participant, ...

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the infants as possible in a play lab a few months after birth, and hopes to track their development as they get older.

"I feel like I know them when I meet them," she says.

Roberto Romero, the obstetrician and gynecologist who heads the Detroit NIH branch, says Thomason's work will have "international impact." He says such research would be expected at universities like Harvard and Yale, but perhaps not at Wayne State.

"This pioneering work is here in Detroit," Romero says. "People in Michigan should be proud."

Romero describes the 21st century as the century of the brain — with discoveries related to the fundamental questions of life, such as how we love or even lie. Thomason's brain scans are a key piece of the puzzle.

That is truly beautiful to think about.

Ingrid Jacques is deputy editorial page editor of The Detroit News. Follow her on Twitter at @Ingrid_Jacques.

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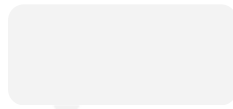



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