The Cancer Health 25: Black Lives Matter

These remarkable individuals are breaking down racial barriers to better cancer care.

June 14, 2021 By Cancer Health Staff

“Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane,” declared Martin Luther King Jr. in 1966.

In 2021, more than 50 years later, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reaffirmed that racism is a public health threat: “The impact is pervasive and deeply embedded in our society—affecting where one lives, learns, works, worships and plays and creating inequities in access to a range of social and economic benefits—such as housing, education, wealth, and employment. These conditions…are key drivers of health inequities within communities of color.”

The health threat is dramatic in cancer. According to the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), “Racial and ethnic minorities face poorer outcomes, are less frequently enrolled in clinical trials and are less likely to be offered palliative care, genetic testing and other critical care. Specifically, African Americans have the highest death rate and shortest length of survival of any racial/ethnic group for most cancers.”

We recognize that many groups experience cancer health disparities, including Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and people who are LGBTQ, older, disabled, poor, rural and more.

This year, however, we dedicate the second annual edition of Cancer Health’s Change Makers to Black lives. The list recognizes 25 individuals who, along with many others, are fighting to break down barriers to the best cancer care for all Americans.

Adewole Shomari Adamson, MD, MPP

Austin, Texas

Adewole Shomari Adamson, MD, MPPCourtesy of Adewole Shomari Adamson/Kelly Davidson Photography

Board-certified dermatologist Adewole “Ade” Adamson, MD, MPP, an assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of Texas at Austin Dell Medical School, cares for patients at high risk for melanoma. His research has challenged the way doctors treat melanoma in people of color. He has also published research on the problematic legacy of dermatologist Albert Kligman, who conducted medical experiments on Black prisoners from the 1950s to the 1970s. Adamson also researches how racial factors might influence the accuracy of artificial intelligence–based diagnostic outcomes.

Leanne Burnham, PhD

Ontario, California

Leanne Burnham, PhDCourtesy of Leanne Burnham

When her father was diagnosed with prostate cancer in his early 50s, Leanne Burnham, PhD, noticed how the disease disproportionately affects Black men. Now a scientist at City of Hope's Division of Health Equities in California, Burnham, 41, addresses prostate cancer health disparities at the research level, in clinical settings and in the Black community. She collaborates extensively to include high-risk Black men in prostate cancer studies. Burnham also helps coordinate free prostate cancer screenings and educational events for Black and Latino men in Los Angeles. Leanne is a Stage IV (metastatic) Hodgkin lymphoma survivor.

John Carpten, PhD

Los Angeles, California

John Carpten, PhDCourtesy of USC Keck School of Medicine

A professor and the director of the Institute of Translational Genomics at the University of Southern California's Keck School of Medicine in Los Angeles, John Carpten, PhD, explores how hereditary genetic variations influence the risk of prostate cancer and its response to treatment. He was an early pioneer in understanding the contribution of biology to disparities in cancer incidence and death rates among African Americans and other underrepresented populations. Carpten serves on the American Association of Cancer Research board of directors. He is also chair of the organization's Minorities in Cancer Research Council, which aims to address disparities in cancer incidence and mortality as well as advance the careers of minority scientists.

Shonta Chambers, MSW

Riverdale, Georgia

Shonta Chambers, MSWCourtesy of Shonta Chambers

As staff lead for the nonprofit Patient Advocate Foundation's health equity work, Shonta Chambers, MSW, 48, uses her voice to elevate the health and quality of life of people with cancer and other chronic diseases. Chambers works with community stakeholders to reduce obstacles to optimal health for people living with disease in low-income neighborhoods. She cochaired the National Comprehensive Cancer Network's Elevating Cancer Equity Working Group, formed to advance equity in oncology. In addition, she works to eliminate tobacco- and cancer-related health disparities as principal investigator of the SelfMade Health Network, part of a consortium of national organizations run by the CDC.

David Tom Cooke, MD

Sacramento, California

David Tom Cooke, MDCourtesy of UC Davis

An associate professor of clinical surgery at the University of California, Davis School of Medicine, David Cooke, MD, 48, is well aware of the inequities that plague medicine. Case in point: He was recently mistaken for an orderly by one of his patients. But such experiences have helped inform his career path. In 2013, Cooke, a national expert on lung and esophageal disease, cofounded the popular bimonthly #LCSM (lung cancer social media) chat on Twitter and in 2019 was named chair of the Society of Thoracic Surgeons' Workforce on Diversity and Inclusion. His scholarly work includes research into disparities in lung cancer care between racial groups.

Andre Dawson

Miami, Florida

Andre DawsonCC BY-SA 2.0/Barbara Moore

In 2012, retired Baseball Hall of Famer Andre “the Hawk” Dawson was working as a special assistant to the Miami Marlins when, during spring training, a routine physical revealed an elevated PSA level. A biopsy later confirmed prostate cancer, and he elected to have his prostate removed. To encourage men to get tested, Dawson began sharing his story with the nonprofit Fans for the Cure, often working with the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami. Now 66 and the owner of a funeral home in Miami, Dawson still urges men, especially Black men, who are at higher risk, to “test as early as possible and stay on top of your health.”

Thomas Farrington

Quincy, Massachusetts

Thomas FarringtonCourtesy of PHEN

Visit the website or Facebook page of Prostate Health Education Network (PHEN)—a nonprofit dedicated to ending African-American prostate cancer disparities—and you'll find webinars, personal testimonies, promotions for the African American Prostate Cancer Disparity Summit in September and scenes from Daddy's Boys, a play about a Black widower and his sons who come together when faced with his prostate cancer. Church partnerships are pivotal to PHEN's outreach, says Thomas Farrington, 77, a prostate cancer survivor and author who launched PHEN in 2003. Daddy's Boys, which began touring theaters and churches in 2018 before going virtual, offers education as entertainment. "Our goal," Farrington says, "is to reach 1 million with this initiative in 2021."

Tamika Felder

Upper Marlboro, Maryland

Tamika FelderCourtesy of Tamika Felder

Award-winning television producer Tamika Felder, 45, lost her fertility and nearly her life when she was diagnosed with Stage II cervical cancer at age 25. Like many Black women, who are more likely than white women to die of this preventable disease, she lacked health insurance. To raise awareness, she founded Tamika & Friends, later renamed Cervivor, a nonprofit that promotes human papillomavirus (HPV) screening and empowers women living with cervical cancer. A community builder and storyteller, Felder supports patients emotionally and helps them navigate becoming patient advocates. She works to change laws to allow fertility preservation for all people with cancer, regardless of skin color or sexual identity. Felder is a member of the President's Cancer Panel's cervical cancer task force.

Jennifer Flowers

Hayward, California

Jennifer FlowersCourtesy of Jennifer Flowers

As a myeloma survivor and a volunteer for The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS), Jennifer Flowers, 64, is dedicated to helping others who have been in her shoes. Diagnosed in 2008 and now in remission, she works with the LLS program Myeloma Link, an outreach and education program for Black Americans with myeloma. As a community outreach volunteer, Flowers connects with Black patients and caregivers to provide reliable information about myeloma and other blood cancers through community-based programs and activities. While dealing with myeloma during the COVID-19 pandemic, Flowers urges her fellow patients to rely on one another and LLS: “Remember, we are better together!”

Jamie Foxx

Thousand Oaks, California

Jamie FoxxCourtesy of Stand Up To Cancer

Academy Award winner Jamie Foxx, 53, knows that colon cancer hits the Black community especially hard. “I’ve lost good friends—young friends—to this deadly disease,” says the popular actor, singer and comedian, who took to Instagram last year to mourn the death of actor Chadwick Boseman from the disease at age 43. Black Americans have the highest rates of colorectal cancer—a highly preventable cancer. Foxx has joined the nonprofit Stand Up To Cancer and the screening firm Exact Sciences as a spokesperson for their joint multimedia campaign to raise awareness in underserved communities about colorectal cancer screening, early detection and prevention to address that disparity.

Ericka Hart

Brooklyn, New York

Ericka HartCourtesy of Ericka Hart

Ericka Hart's desire to challenge ingrained assumptions about breast cancer for people of color is informed by her own experiences as a survivor. When she was 28, the sexuality educator and performer, who uses she/they pronouns, was diagnosed with the disease in both breasts. Once she recovered, Hart, 35, felt that it was her responsibility to ensure that mainstream portrayals of breast cancer patients expanded to include people like her—people who are Black and queer or nonbinary. Ever since, Hart has fought to dispel stereotypes associated with the disease and its treatment by advocating for screening and sexual health awareness.

Candace Henley

Chicago, Illinois

Candace HenleyCourtesy of Candace Henley

At age 36, after several visits to the ER, Candace Henley was eventually diagnosed with colon cancer. In Chicago, low-income Black and Latino communities face cancer death rates that are up to double the national average. Henley, 53, who lost her home and car while recovering from the illness, saw the need for more minority outreach. When her appeals to local organizations were unsuccessful, Henley launched the event Blue Hat Bow Tie Sunday, which later became The Blue Hat Foundation. Now, 15 churches in Chicago and in other cities throughout the country host the event. Blue Hat provides education, information and free screenings for the disease in minority and medically underserved communities.

Karen Eubanks Jackson

Houston, Texas

Karen Eubanks JacksonCourtesy of Sisters Network Inc.

A 28-year survivor of four breast cancer diagnoses, Karen Eubanks Jackson was first diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer in 1993. This motivated her to create Sisters Network Inc. in 1994, the largest and only national Black breast cancer survivor organization. Many Black women with breast cancer face unmet needs and may face worse outcomes, not only due to lack of health care and insurance but also as a result of daily experience with systemic racial injustice and insufficient income, she notes. Sisters Network Inc. helps women via educational outreach programs, survivor and family support, and financial assistance. Jackson shared her story in the book In the Company of My Sisters: My Story, My Truth.

Maimah Karmo

Reston, Virginia

Maimah KarmoCourtesy of Maimah Karmo/Madiou Art

In 2006, at age 32, Maimah Karmo, a Liberia native, had already survived three wars and a lightning strike when she was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer. The experience inspired Karmo to found the nonprofit Tigerlily Foundation to support and advocate for young women with breast cancer. In 2011, Karmo collaborated with U.S. Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida on the Breast Cancer Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young (EARLY) Act. She was appointed to the federal Advisory Committee on Breast Cancer in Young Women, where she works to raise awareness of breast cancer and increase access to preventive screenings, particularly for high-risk populations, such as Black women.

Ibram X. Kendi, PhD

Boston, Massachusetts

Ibram X. Kendi, PhDCourtesy of Boston University Center for Antiracist Research/Stephen Voss

Racism is like a metastatic cancer on America, writes humanities professor Ibram X. Kendi, PhD, founding director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. It's an apt metaphor—and a personal one. The National Book Award–winning author of Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America was diagnosed with Stage IV (metastatic) colon cancer at age 35. At the time, he was completing How to Be an Antiracist, another groundbreaking best seller. In his books and speeches, Kendi, 38, culls from his personal experiences with cancer and racism as he encourages us to become antiracist, insights that earned him a place on Time magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in 2020.

Erin Kobetz, PhD, MPH

Miami, Florida

Erin Kobetz, PhD, MPHCourtesy of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center

In 2003, Erin Kobetz, PhD, MPH, a professor at the University of Miami, discovered astonishingly high rates of cervical cancer in the Haitian community in Miami. Using her personal experience as a thyroid cancer survivor, she reached out directly to the community of Little Haiti and was able to successfully collaborate with local experts to find culturally sensitive ways to improve screening. Kobetz, 45, continues to support marginalized communities through her internationally recognized work, which focuses on dialogue and partnership between academic researchers and local community members. Kobetz's motto, "We are stronger together," is a reflection of her innovative, collaborative approach to cancer prevention and health equity.

Russell Ledet, PhD

New Orleans, Louisiana

Russell Ledet, PhDCourtesy of Russell Ledet

Russell Ledet, PhD, 35, has made an impact around the world in support of underrepresented minority students looking to enter the medical field. A Navy veteran, Ledet worked as a security guard at a local hospital and later returned to the same hospital as a medical student. In 2020, motivated by the glaring racial disparities in health care, including oncology, Ledet cofounded The 15 White Coats, a nonprofit organization that provides inspiration and economic support for future medical students of color. When he goes into residency, Ledet plans to focus on mental health access for marginalized communities.

Edith P. Mitchell, MD

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Edith P. Mitchell, MDCourtesy of Thomas Jefferson University

In 1972, while being fitted for her white coat, Edith P. Mitchell, MD, was asked whether she was excited to be working in the hospital kitchen. Today, the medical oncologist, a clinical professor at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia who specializes in gastrointestinal malignancies, serves as the associate director of diversity services at Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center. A former president of the National Medical Association and an inductee into the National Historical Black College Hall of Fame, Mitchell, a retired Air Force brigadier general, keeps racial disparities and underserved populations, including LGBTQ people, at the forefront of her work in oncology.

Marcella Nunez-Smith, MD, MHS

New Haven, Connecticut

Marcella Nunez-Smith, MD, MHSCourtesy of Yale University/Dan Renzetti

One of the nation’s foremost experts on health equity, Marcella Nunez-Smith, MD, MHS, pursued a medical degree after her childhood in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Influenced by her mother, a nursing professor, and her father, who suffered a debilitating stroke in his 40s, Nunez-Smith, an associate dean at Yale University, has devoted her career to examining the social and structural drivers of health disparities among marginalized populations and works to improve cancer health and health care equity. This year, she became a senior adviser to the White House COVID-19 Response Team and chair of the COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force.

Lori J. Pierce, MD

Ann Arbor, Michigan

Lori J. Pierce, MDCourtesy of ASCO

Lori J. Pierce, MD, served as the 2020–2021 president of ASCO, the first Black woman to hold that position. In 2018, Pierce, a radiation oncologist and professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, was elected to the National Academy of Medicine in recognition of her research on radiation treatment for breast cancer and her efforts to draw more women and people of color into medicine. Equity of care was the theme of Pierce's ASCO presidency, a goal that became even more pressing during the COVID-19 pandemic. She aims to foster a more diverse oncology workforce that better reflects the patients it serves.

Jeanne M. Regnante

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jeanne M. RegnanteCourtesy of LUNGevity

As chief health equity and diversity officer at the national nonprofit LUNGevity Foundation, Jeanne M. Regnante, 60, works to change outcomes for people with lung cancer by ensuring that all patients—from low socioeconomic communities, racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTQ communities as well as older people, immigrants, people with disabilities and rural populations—receive equal access to care and treatment and inclusion in clinical trials. She believes that engaging with vulnerable communities and listening to their perspectives is the most effective way to develop strategies to empower them.

Jamil Rivers

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jamil RiversCourtesy of Jamil Rivers

Four years ago, Jamil Rivers, 43, was diagnosed with Stage IV (metastatic) breast cancer. In learning everything she could about the disease, Rivers made a commitment to address the disparities she noticed in breast cancer care and improve health equity for women of color. She dived into advocacy, sharing her experiences and using her voice to advance legislative policy and research. In 2020, she launched the Chrysalis Initiative, a nonprofit that mentors patients with breast cancer and teaches them how to navigate resources and emphasizes outreach to African-American women. In 2020, she became the first Black board president of METAvivor, a national nonprofit dedicated to funding research for metastatic breast cancer.

Ashani Tanjua Weeraratna, PhD

Baltimore, Maryland

Ashani Tanjua Weeraratna, PhDCourtesy of Ashan Tanjua Weeraratna

Ashani Tanjua Weeraratna, PhD, 50, a Bloomberg Distinguished Professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, is a staunch advocate for immigrants and women in science, including women of color. A winner of the Melanoma Research Foundation's 2015 established investigator award, Weeraratna, whose research focuses on the impact of aging on the development and progression of melanoma, is the 2020–2021 president of the Society for Melanoma Research. A native of Sri Lanka, she fought obstacles to her own immigration and now, as a citizen, advocates against policies that keep fellow immigrants from contributing to American science and cancer research.

Karen M. Winkfield, MD, PhD

Nashville, Tennessee

Karen M. Winkfield, MD, PhDCourtesy of Karen Winkfield/Kumolu Studios

Radiation oncologist Karen M. Winkfield, MD, PhD, 51, executive director of the Meharry-Vanderbilt Alliance in Nashville, is a national expert on ways to engage communities to reduce barriers that lead to racial disparities in cancer. She has long worked in underserved communities to identify the elements of institutional racism that keep people with cancer from entering clinical trials. She's on Stand Up To Cancer's Health Equity Committee and oversees its efforts to increase diverse enrollment in cancer clinical trials, fund innovative research that addresses cancer inequities and raise awareness of cancer screenings in underserved communities.

Robert Winn, MD

Richmond, Virginia

Robert Winn, MDCourtesy of VCU Massey Cancer Center

In December 2019, when Robert Winn, MD, was named director of Virginia Commonwealth University's Massey Cancer Center in Richmond, he became the only Black director among the National Cancer Institute's 71 designated cancer centers at the time. A pulmonologist who conducts basic research on lung cancer, Winn, 56, focuses much of his work on health disparities and community-based health care. He is cochair of the Elevating Cancer Equity Working Group, convened this year by the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, as well as the National Comprehensive Cancer Network and the National Minority Quality Forum. The group has developed an Equity Report Card that includes recommendations for community engagement,

accessibility of care and addressing bias in care delivery. In February, he hosted First Lady Jill Biden for a tour and a live-streamed discussion about how Massey is working with the community to address cancer disparities.

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