

Charlene Flash, MD '06: A Goal to Put Herself Out Of Work

Growing up, Charlene Flash, MD '06, realized her parents had no patience for what were perceived of as frivolous careers.

“My family is from the Caribbean,” the physician says during her morning drive in Pearland, Texas. “In Caribbean first-generation families, you can be a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer.”

Born in Brooklyn and reared in Stamford, Connecticut, Dr. Flash recalls, “Some parents would give their kids \$1 for every A. And my parents would look at me and say, ‘Why should we pay you for what you are supposed to be doing? Wait, what is that? Bs—what are Bs?’ My father went to the University of the West Indies. He did his law degree in the U.S. The only schools they had heard of were Yale and Harvard and Duke. I had never heard of anywhere else.”

Clearly their expectations paid off. As an undergraduate in chemistry at Yale University, Dr. Flash visited an AIDS hospice, Bread & Roses, and a lifelong mission began. Now assistant medical director of HIV Prevention

BY JACQUELINE CUTLER

Services for Harris Health System in Houston, Dr. Flash is also an assistant professor of medicine in the section of infectious diseases at Baylor College of Medicine.

“I was always a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed dreamer,” she says. “I wanted to do something with AIDS or cancer, and after working with the AIDS hospice director, I knew that is what I wanted to do.”

When it came time for medical school, the recently married Dr. Flash wanted to remain on the East Coast. Once she established residence in New Jersey, the in-state tuition at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School was a plus.

The main attraction, though, was that “they had a robust clinical education, they had research, and they had a commitment to working in underserved communities and working with the homeless. That commitment was very important to me,” she says.

In 2006, she earned both an MD from the medical school and a master

of public health degree in quantitative health care assessment from what is now the Rutgers School of Public Health.

Even among a very smart and committed student body, she was “a shining star,” says Patricia Whitley-Williams, MD, professor and former chair, Department of Pediatrics; and chief, division of allergy, immunology, and infectious diseases.

“She had a level of professionalism and maturity about her,” Dr. Whitley-Williams says. “She worked with our pediatric infectious disease division on a project that looked at how many pregnant women were being screened for HIV, part of a nationwide initiative to identify pregnant women who were positive, and which would allow them to receive HIV treatment and prevent transmission from mother to child.”

“She was one of the most motivated medical students I have mentored,” says Sunanda Gaur, MD, professor of pediatrics and director, Robert Wood Johnson AIDS Program. “As a third- and fourth-year medical student, she worked with me on a project related to rapid HIV testing among women in labor, which was eventually published. I remember her as being very



COURTESY OF CHARLENE FLASH, MD, '06

professional, well poised, bright, hard-working, and organized. She already had a child at that point, and I was quite impressed at her ability to balance her home and medical life.”

At the medical school, Dr. Flash and some of her classmates started the Homeless and Indigent Population Health Outreach Project (HIPHOP) to help the poorest residents in New Brunswick. During her residency in internal medicine and pediatrics at Brown University and a fellowship in adult infectious diseases at Harvard University, Dr. Flash found that her time at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School served her well.

“I can remember going to my residency alongside people who had gone to more well-known medical schools

but feeling incredibly well prepared,” she says. “Even now, I still talk about Robert Wood Johnson. We had a ‘sex week’ curriculum, where you talk about sexually transmitted infections and sexual gender minorities; that kind of training created the foundation for what I am doing now.

“Most doctors aren’t even comfortable taking a sexual history, and at Robert Wood we had an entire week,” she adds. “The experiences with HIPHOP and Elijah’s Soup Kitchen, where we would recruit them to come in from around the corner, that idea of bringing care to where people are, and the power of touch—all of that I got at Robert Wood. It was fantastic.”

Her determination to speak openly with patients led Dr. Flash to start an

HIV prevention program in 2012, shortly after moving to Texas. “You have to have something more to give patients than, ‘You should have used a condom,’ and ‘come back in three months,’” she says. Dr. Flash works to ensure patients’ health by prescribing pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and she views her current situation as an opportunity: “There are very few places in the U.S. where you can provide primary care to large numbers of people with HIV.”

Between working with underserved communities, overseeing medical students making rounds, and speaking at international conferences for physicians specializing in AIDS, what does Dr. Flash do to relax or for hobbies?

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