

GRADUATES

Alumni changing the world of public health

A TIRELESS ADVOCATE FOR FAMILY HEALTH

Tochi Iroku-Malize, MD, MPH '08, MBA

IT TOOK TWO TRIES, BUT TOCHI IROKU-MALIZE FINALLY GOT THE ADMISSIONS OFFICE AT COLUMBIA MAILMAN SCHOOL TO SIT UP AND TAKE NOTICE OF HER. “I just want to let you know that in the future, I will be well known for the work I do internationally,” she wrote in her personal statement when she applied to the School. “And so the choice is, will I say that I’m an alumnus of Columbia, or of another organization?”

It was a fitting pronouncement from someone like Iroku-Malize, the oldest daughter of a surgeon and a nurse practitioner who had big plans to become a leader in the healthcare field. Iroku-Malize had earned her medical degree at the University of Nigeria and had moved back to New York City, where she was born and spent most of her childhood, when she applied to get her MPH. “Lo and behold,” she says with a chuckle about her boldness, “I was accepted.”

In 1998, she started on the Health Policy and Management track. At that time, policymakers and insurance companies had turned to health maintenance organizations to try to make healthcare more efficient. Iroku-Malize recalls learning about that shift from her professors and how it was designed to make primary care doctors gatekeepers. The hardship this created stuck with her and still informs the advocacy work she does today as senior vice president of family medicine at Northwell Health and past president of the American Academy of Family Physicians. “The system is broken and puts a tremendous burden on primary care doctors,” she says. “We need to do better.”

Iroku-Malize set out on her personal path to become a primary care doctor in 1999 after being accepted into the family medicine residency program at Southside Hospital on Long Island (now South Shore University Hospital, part of Northwell Health). She became chief resident and

stayed on after graduation to help start a hospital medicine program. Soon she was director of that program, using her MPH training to think about conflict resolution, create a strategic business plan, and figure out metrics to see if the program was successful.

She wasn’t quite finished with her MPH, taking a leave and not returning until 2007 after she had added another role at the hospital: associate director, then director, of the family medicine residency program. Returning to Columbia Mailman School, she discovered that the School had innovated, using the flipped classroom and team-based learning, two changes that informed her when she helped Northwell Health create its medical school in 2008. She is the inaugural chair and professor of family medicine at the school. “I was always a go-getter,” she says of all the different roles she has juggled. “And that’s what I was trying to tell the admissions committee in my letter, like, ‘Yeah, listen, I plan on doing some things.’”



FIGHTING FOR AFRICA’S MOTHERS

Dvora Joseph Davey, MPH ’03, PhD

Dvora Joseph Davey became frustrated while working in Mozambique early in her career. Her job was to increase HIV prevention and treatment, but one-third of her U.S.-based funding was tied to abstinence education and another third focused on partner fidelity, with just the last third for promoting condom use. “It seemed so ridiculous to me that you would be telling sex workers, or any population, that you have to abstain from sex and remain faithful,” she says. “It was the opposite of what I had learned at Columbia Mailman School, which was to focus on evidence-based interventions.”

Joseph Davey soon left the post to return to school for a PhD in epidemiology. Today, she lives in Cape Town and works as an epidemiology research associate professor at the David Geffen School of Medicine and Fielding School of Public Health at UCLA, where she not only does research but also helps bring about policy changes that are backed up by science. In 2022, thanks to her work with colleagues evaluating interventions to increase the use of HIV-prevention drugs, South Africa became

one of the first countries to publish guidelines on using PrEP to prevent HIV acquisition and vertical transmission of HIV from pregnant and breastfeeding women to their infants.

Joseph Davey’s interest in such work goes back to her time at Columbia Mailman School. Under the tutelage of maternal health giant Professor Deborah Maine, PhD, Joseph Davey helped evaluate UNICEF programs that were part of the School’s Averting Maternal Death and Disability Program, which Maine started. Then-Dean Allan Rosenfield, MD, another champion of maternal health and HIV prevention, was a big influence. “Allan and Deborah were key in making us realize the importance of reaching women with contraception and safe obstetric options,” she says.

After graduation, she went to Rwanda to study couples where one partner was HIV positive and the other wasn’t, to assist in preventing transmission and help pregnant women to get antiretrovirals. She went on to several nongovernmental organizations before getting a doctorate. “I’ve always been passionate about working with pregnant women and making sure women can access contraception so they can get pregnant when they want to—all harkening back to my days at Columbia Mailman School. It really stayed with me,” she says. Coming full circle, Joseph Davey joined the School’s Board of Advisors in 2024.

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VIEWING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH THE LENS OF HISTORY

Chinwe Onyekere, MPH '02

Chinwe Onyekere focused on history and public health while earning her Sociomedical Sciences MPH. Her thesis examined the intersection of bebop, Harlem, and heroin, chronicling how public policies, infrastructure, and other factors made a once-healthy neighborhood vulnerable to the drug epidemic.

“I still remember the course, A History of Public Health Decline in Harlem with Professor Bob Fullilove,” she says. “It just opened my lens. It was incredible. And then Professor Beverly Watkins took us on a Harlem walking tour that brought to life how the built environment can affect health outcomes.”

Onyekere still views public health through a historic lens, and hasn't forgotten her professors' other lessons, such as the importance of addressing the social determinants of health and “understanding how community has the solutions.” She has applied those lessons again and again—from elevating how disparities of care and quality are interrelated while at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to working as executive director of

Health Leads New York, an initiative at Harlem Hospital where providers can prescribe resources like job training or food access to patients, with volunteers connecting patients to resources.

She later brought those ideas to Main Line Health's Lankenau Medical Center in Pennsylvania. Onyekere was born in the hospital and grew up in adjacent West Philly, which has consistently poor health outcomes. She created a half-acre farm on hospital grounds to provide fresh food to patients—eventually getting to meet first lady Michelle Obama. “I have chills just thinking about it,” Onyekere recalls. While at Lankenau, Onyekere also co-founded the health equity nonprofit Together for West Philadelphia.

Today, as a program officer at Vanguard's Strong Start for Kids, she takes a community participatory grantmaking approach to funding early-childhood initiatives such as helping residents start a neighborhood literacy program and bringing a mobile preschool to children attending home-based child care. While residents of West Philly and Harlem have struggled for a long time, their return to health will only happen if the community drives the recovery. “At Columbia Mailman School, I learned to understand the history of a place and then leverage that to do things differently in a way that centers the community. That was a major take-home message for me.”



LISTENING TO VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Lourdes Rodríguez, DrPH '04

When Lourdes Rodríguez came to the School in 1999, university security guards warned students not to cross over to the east side of Broadway. “I had already crossed Broadway,” Rodríguez says, “and the people on the other side looked more like me than the guards did.”

Immersing herself in communities experiencing difficult conditions was the reason Rodríguez had come to the School. The Puerto Rico native chose the Sociomedical Sciences track because it offered her an interdisciplinary learning space that made room for inquiry with the community. Still, she nearly quit the MPH program after she began working on a National Institutes of Health-funded research project, asking family members to corroborate data reported by research participants who were experiencing their first break of psychosis and struggling with substance use. Family members wanted to share their sadness and fear to make meaning of the moment, but the research design did not allow for that. It was disheartening. “But the chair said to me, ‘What do you need?

Because we've lost too many Latinas, and you can't go.’ I said, ‘I need to do research grounded in community.’” This opened the door for her to join the Northern Manhattan Community Voices Collaborative, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. There, she cut her teeth on developing community-university partnerships.

After graduation, she co-directed the Urbanism and the Built Environment track, a groundbreaking program that looked at how city planning could help or hinder public health. This served her well when she joined the New York State Health Foundation in 2012. In 2016, she left for the University of Texas at Austin where she built a community-based research unit before working in public health philanthropy.

In 2022, she became CEO of the David Rockefeller Fund, where she is changing the “transactional” model of awarding grants and receiving reports to building deeper relationships. “I want us to work *together*, rather than in parallel,” she says. It's a fitting focus for someone at the forefront of community-based public health, and one that is now ingrained in every MPH student. Today, the School's orientation includes a neighborhood walk that, yes, has students crossing Broadway.

Journalist **Nancy Averett** covers public health from Cincinnati, Ohio.