

# GRADUATES

Alumni Changing the World of Public Health

## A BAD RELATIONSHIP LED TO A CAREER HELPING OTHERS

Vivian Cortes, MPH '10, PhD

**VIVIAN CORTES HAS SPENT HER CAREER HELPING TO ENSURE THAT THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE CENTERED AND UPLIFTED.** The seed was planted by a formative experience in her undergraduate years: “I had a toxic relationship,” she says. “I decided to learn more about sexual health and healthy relationships, and I realized that I enjoyed educating young people about how to take care of themselves.” After graduation, Cortes worked for the nonprofit Community Healthcare Network, teaching sexual health to New Yorkers, with a focus on marginalized communities. At Columbia Mailman School, she chose the sexual and reproductive health track. “A Latino fellowship covered tuition; without it, I wouldn’t have been able to pursue graduate studies,” she recalls.

One of her favorite classes was taught by Linda Cushman, PhD, now professor emerita of Population and Family Health. “I thought a class called Research Design and Data



## THINKING BIG ABOUT HELPING PEOPLE

Mwango Kashoki, MD/MPH '02

Collection was going to be so heavy and boring, but it was really exciting,” Cortes says. She also appreciated a class on the Pedagogy of Sexuality Education taught by Leslie Kantor, MPH '92, PhD, now at Rutgers University. “I learned we can’t just dump information on folks. If we want to change behavior or attitudes, we need to try exercises that allow the message to resonate, such as condom demonstrations or having people role-play calling a clinic about birth control.”

Cortes put those lessons into practice when she went to work for the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in 2014. She oversaw community engagement in the Teens Connection program, which employed youth as sexual and reproductive health education ambassadors. When she pursued a doctorate in public health, she took what she learned about participatory research back to the office and involved 20 young people as researchers in a project about how young people communicated sexual consent. “#MeToo was bubbling up,” she recalls. “And *Love & Hip Hop* and other shows were having conversations about consent.”

The team Cortes led held focus groups and created a research-informed awareness campaign of three one-minute videos featuring teens worrying about the awkwardness of asking for consent but also imagining what might happen if they didn’t. The videos have been viewed by more than 100,000 people. Her research paper about this project, “Addressing Sexual Consent: Youth Participatory Action Research with the New York City Department of Health,” has been accepted for publication in *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*.

Recently, Cortes was promoted to director of women’s health and family wellness suites at the health department. The new role “has been challenging in ways that are helping me grow professionally,” she says. But as before, she adds, “I’m excited to offer up the experience that I have to guide my team.”

Photographs: (left) John Herr; (right) courtesy of subject

The ICU was filling up on a hectic evening. Mwango Kashoki bustled around the unit. But as the second-year internal medicine resident worked fervently with colleagues to care for another patient who was crashing, she acknowledged to herself that direct patient care wasn’t her passion. “That was a turning point that got me thinking about different career choices,” says Kashoki, reflecting on that day 25 years later. “When I spoke with people about switching out of internal medicine, they were like, ‘You gotta be crazy. Just finish up your residency. You don’t have that far to go.’ But I knew I needed to do something different in medicine.”

Kashoki, who grew up in Zambia and witnessed the devastation of the AIDS epidemic there, had always thought she’d work directly with patients. But after that day in the ICU, she decided that rather than one-on-one care, she wanted to work at the population health level. She restarted her residency in preventive medicine at Stony Brook University, where the program included an MPH from Columbia Mailman School.

At Columbia Mailman School, she took classes in health policy, biostatistics, and the social determinants of health. Professor of Sociomedical Sciences Robert E. Fullilove, EdD, stood out because of how he helped students understand how patients in the community experienced and accessed healthcare. “I expanded my knowledge about how data and policies shape our healthcare, community engagement, and patients’ agency in their treatment decisions,” she recalls.

Kashoki’s residency program rotated her through local health departments, as well as the Surgeon General’s office in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In those places, she analyzed big datasets to inform decision-making, and she began to envision a career as a regulator. Postgraduation, she went to work at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), where she started off assessing pharmaceutical companies’ clinical trial proposals to ensure they were correctly designed. One of her first assignments was looking at the drug pregabalin for the treatment of fibromyalgia. Because the diagnostic criteria had not been fully determined at that time, designing trials and assessing the drug’s approvability was complicated. “I still smile when I see that drug, because I’m like, ‘Hey, I contributed to that’—not as much as the scientists that identified the molecule and people who ran the studies, but I had a role to play in getting the drug to patients.”

After 16 years and successive leadership roles at the FDA, Kashoki took a position with Parexel International, a clinical research organization. Today she is global head of regulatory strategy, with an interdisciplinary team of global advisors to pharmaceutical companies. Now she’s on the other side of drug development, strategizing on new medicines and trials, evaluating data, and advising on regulatory submissions to the FDA. Looking back on her decision to leave behind a career as an internal medicine doctor, she has few regrets. “I am still kind of nerdy, so data is exciting to me. But my motivation continues to be, ‘How do I help make people better?’” she says. “And I want to do it in broader strokes than one person at a time—not to diminish that, I love my doctor—but yeah, that’s what keeps me going.”

## GRADUATES



### PIVOT, THEN PIVOT AGAIN

Brad Kerner, MPH '05

Brad Kerner went from international public health worker to retail store owner after he and his family watched the documentary *A Plastic Ocean* in 2019. The film led Kerner to launch an Instagram feed called “My Plastic-Free Family Feud,” where he humorously documented steps he took to reduce his family’s plastic waste. He shared his ideas at a stand at his local farmers market in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and was soon known as “The Eco Dude.” Then he won a contest for new retail entrepreneurs. “I was given keys to a 2,300-square-foot store. It became Eco Evolution,” he says.

It was a big change for someone who had spent his career in international public health. Kerner was a Peace Corps volunteer in Gabon, where he convinced the head of the railroad to make his 300 male workers attend sexual health workshops. “They would talk to me and get condoms and learn about HIV and family planning,” Kerner says. “It was fun.”

After Gabon, Kerner decided to get his MPH. But he did not do as well on the GRE as he’d hoped, and he worried he might not get into his first choice: Columbia Mailman School.

He set up a meeting with Therese McGinn, DrPH '04, now a professor emerita in the Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health. McGinn had also been a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa. “I told her I didn’t think my scores were good enough and she said, ‘You’re a man who wants to be in population and family health. We’re letting you in.’”

In 2001, he began in the Program on Forced Migration and Health while working full time at Harlem’s Public School 135 as a sexual and reproductive health educator in a clinic run by NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital and Columbia Mailman School. Kerner studied epidemiology and social determinants of health, as well as refugees’ sexual and reproductive health. Then he spent 17 years traveling the world as a sexual health educator for Save the Children. He left in 2021 to focus full time on Eco Evolution. His public health training helped him in retail. “I had my implementation plan, my monitoring and evaluation plan, and I used data for decision-making,” he says.

Kerner is proud of the store, which has finally reached a point of stability. Last year, he took a full-time job as vice president of community engagement and impact at Feeding Westchester. “Food insecurity is a social determinant of health, and so I continue to feel connected to public health,” he says. Kerner already has plans to cut back on the food bank’s use of plastic bags. “They all know I’m The Eco Dude,” he says with a laugh.



### AT HOME ON CAPITOL HILL

Emily Katz, MPH '08

Emily Katz had already dipped a toe into health policy when she decided to get her MPH. As a legislative aide to U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), she absorbed his focus on elder healthcare. Katz chose Columbia Mailman School because of its Health Policy and Management track. Due to her interest in healthy aging, she got involved in the International Longevity Center, now the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center, using biostatistics to model Medicare impacts of various health services. Eventually, she returned to Wyden’s office as a healthcare policy staffer and helped support passage of the Affordable Care Act, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. “The top thought leaders in the country were emailing me directly with ideas,” she says. “It was unbelievable to be able to process that on [Wyden’s] behalf and make recommendations and write legislation that ultimately made it into the bill.”

Katz would eventually move on to work with other legislators, including U.S. Rep Diana DeGette (D-Colo.) and U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), both champions of reproductive rights. Along the way, she’d look back on what she learned. “Even though I was a health policy student, I still think about core classes of epidemiology and environmental health

today,” she says. “I’ve done so much work in reproductive rights. There are a lot of arguments there that are not just about autonomy, but about economic health for the country and for a woman and her family.”

When Boxer announced her retirement in 2015, Katz decided to leave Capitol Hill as well. She became a healthcare lobbyist, working on drug pricing and policy for Express Scripts and then on a variety of healthcare issues for lobbying firms. Today, she’s vice president and healthcare practice chair for Van Scoyoc Associates where she represents hospitals, pharmacies, and other clients. “I love it because I get to work on multiple issues,” she says. “I get to work on artificial intelligence policy. I get to work on hospital reimbursement policy. I get to work on pharmacy policy.” And while she no longer works directly for a politician, she’s still frequently on Capitol Hill. She says some legislative staffers and lobbyists shy away from healthcare because they think it’s too dense or boring. But Katz is quick to remind them that they know more than they think they do just from personal experience, whether they’ve battled with a health insurer over a deductible or visited a loved one in the hospital. “People are like, ‘Oh, healthcare, it’s too complicated. I could never!’” she says. “And I respond, ‘But you know more than you think you do, and it impacts you so personally.’ Some people refuse to work on healthcare policy. But I love it for all those reasons.”

**Nancy Averett** covers public health from Cincinnati.