



Making Things Happen

Dr. Lisa Perry-Gilkes, president of San Bernardino's African-American Health Initiative, strives to be a steward for the medical profession.

BY LAUREL DiGANGI

WHEN LISA PERRY-GILKES entered Atlanta's Spelman College in 1976, she envisioned graduating with an engineering degree.

But her love of the hard sciences, coupled with her enthusiasm for the human aspects of medicine, led her to pursue a longer, more difficult path.

"My parents were pleased and proud that I wanted to be a physician," she says, "and very encouraging."

Dr. Perry-Gilkes has since embraced the responsibility to serve as a "steward," protecting the sanctity of her profession by becoming actively involved with her colleagues and the community at large.

"Instead of waiting for something to happen," she says, "I want to make things happen."

And there's no doubt she's doing just that.

Dr. Perry-Gilkes chairs the Division of Head and Neck Surgery/Otolaryngology at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center (ARMC), the county hospital serving the San Bernardino area, where she's the sole female in her department.

Throughout her career, she has joined and worked with more than a dozen professional groups and philanthropic organizations.

And she manages to balance her professional responsibilities with a thriving family life, which includes her husband, Ulric Gilkes, an ARMC emergency physician; sons James, 12, and Ivan, 13; and a menagerie of pets: two birds, three dogs and four rabbits.

When asked about successful juggling, Dr. Perry-Gilkes acknowledges her "great support system," which includes her extended family and friends. She also believes in the strength of organized medicine, through which physicians can effect change.



Illustration by Doug Griswold/KRT Graphics; photograph by Mary Ann Stuehrmann

Women

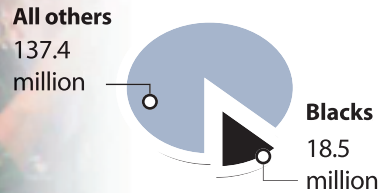
AND DEMOGRAPHICS

A statistical look at blacks

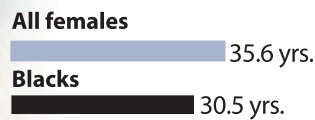
Some measures of African-American women in the United States:

HOW MANY

U.S. female population, 1998:

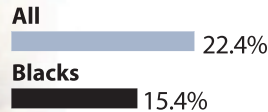


MEDIAN AGE



EDUCATION

Percent of women with college degree or more:



WORK, INCOME

	All women	Blacks
In labor force	60%	63.7%
Unemployed	4.7%	9%
Median income	\$13,703	\$13,048

Research/JUDY TREIBLE; Graphic/KEITH SIMMONS/KRT

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"Physicians often don't realize the value that organized medicine offers," she says. "Being a member of organized medicine is a means by which I can be proactive instead of reactive. There's so much more we can do by being part of organized medicine than we can as individuals."

As president of San Bernardino's African-American Health Initiative (AAHI), Dr. Perry-Gilkes is working toward reducing health risks and improving overall health quality for the county's African-American residents. These pa-

tients, she says, generally experience serious healthcare disparities, including higher infant mortality, shorter life expectancy, a greater incidence of hypertension and other conditions, and underinsurance.

AAHI is a partnership of the San Bernardino County Medical Society (of which Dr. Perry-Gilkes is a board member), the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health, the Inland Wellness Information Network and more than 30 regional organizations.

"The focus is to educate the commu-



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nity—to increase access and find methods so the insured have care,” she says. “We’re not a treatment facility, but we want to let people with hypertension and other health problems common to African-Americans take responsibility and improve their lives.”

During the weekend of Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday, AAHI sponsored a county health fair and walk for hypertension. The group is also working on a directory of healthcare providers that will be made available to the community.

“People don’t get care because they don’t know where to go,” Dr. Perry-Gilkes says.

African-Americans may fail to seek care because they have trust issues with non-African-American physicians—a problem that can be solved, she says, by educating the community, teaching

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physicians to be culturally sensitive and increasing the number of African-American med-school graduates.

Great Expectations

Dr. Perry-Gilkes attended Howard University School of Medicine in Washington, DC—an institution with a primarily African-American student body. She chose Howard because she wanted to be graded on merit. Even though she made the honor roll each year, the dean’s list three consecutive years and belonged to several honor societies, she admits the coursework was difficult.

“The faculty had great expectations of us,” she says. “They worked us hard. It was important to the faculty that the students finished and did well.”

She enjoyed camaraderie with fellow

students and faculty members. Sexism was “no big deal,” she says, in a class that was 40% female.

Upon completing her internship at Howard, Dr. Perry-Gilkes accepted a residency at Martin Luther King Jr.-Charles R. Drew Medical Center in Los Angeles. In her first year, she married classmate Ulric Gilkes, and by residency’s end, she had given birth to her sons.

A fellow of both the American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery and the American College of Surgeons, Dr. Perry-Gilkes chose her specialty because it offered an opportunity to work with patients of all ages. She also enjoys performing the delicate procedures otolaryngologic surgery entails.

Beyond Institutional Racism

Dr. Perry-Gilkes admits she’s been on the receiving end of racism as a physician, but “not enough to get all upset and jump up and down about it.” What infuriates her, however, is institutional racism.

“It really burns me,” she says.

She refers to an unnamed local university that has a very poor record of graduating minority students. As president of the James Wesley Vines Jr., MD, Medical Society, a component of the National Medical Association, she and other African-American physicians have tried to work with this university, without much success. In its medical program’s 25 years, only one black student—a Caribbean-American—has graduated.

By contrast, she trumpets the historically black and Catholic Xavier University in New Orleans, which has placed more African-Americans in medical school than any other college.

“Never let anyone define you but yourself,” she advises African-American medical students and physicians who have experienced racism.

Young Physicians Unite

Dr. Perry-Gilkes joined the San Bernardino County Medical Society and the California Medical Association in 1992. For two years, she served as chair of San Bernardino’s Young Physician

Section (YPS), which represents up-and-coming physicians in the political arena. The AMA cited her for her work in 1999.

She has also served as a CMA alternate delegate, has been on the executive board of the CMA’s YPS, and has served as vice chair of the CMA-YPS delegation to the AMA.

Dr. Perry-Gilkes treasures her participation in what she dubs her “girly clubs,” including Jack & Jill of America (the nation’s oldest African-American family organization) and the San Bernardino County Arts Foundation. She sets aside time to mentor high-school students interested in science.

Despite all of her activism, Dr. Perry-Gilkes doesn’t envision herself as a crusader.

“I think I’m doing what everyone else should,” she says. “I don’t see myself as doing anything more. I’m just a citizen who participates in life.” ♦

Laurel DiGangi is a Burbank-based freelance writer. She is a regular contributor to Southern California Physician.



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