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# UNCOMMON GOOD

WINTER 2018 ■ VOLUME 15 ■ NUMBER 2

## African-American Physician is First Recipient of Unprecedented Award from LA Care Health Plan



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Temitope James Ajagbe, first recipient of an Elevating the Safety Net Physician Loan Repayment Program grant.

“What is it like for you,” I asked, “to be a member of a very prestigious profession, medicine, but also to be a member of two groups that often are treated harshly in this country – immigrants and African-American men?”

Dr. Temitope James Ajagbe (James) is a large man with an even bigger personality that fills up a room like sunshine. On a recent day this fall he was especially animated as he discussed his life, his medical practice at an Altamed community clinic, and his being the first recipient of a generous and visionary program launched by Los Angeles Care Health Plan, in partnership with Uncommon Good, to address the physician shortage for the poor in Los Angeles County.

But before we get to James’ answer, a little background: The United States has a doctor shortage problem. The Association of American Medical Colleges released a study this year that showed that in the next decade the country will be short 120,000 physicians. The problem could worsen because one third of all active doctors in the U.S. will be over 65 in the next decade and could retire. The problem is particularly severe if you are a poor person seeking care in California because this state ranks 47th in the nation in Medi-Cal reimbursement rates. A doctor’s visit is reimbursed for the equivalent of the cost of a large pizza. Accordingly, few doctors accept Medi-Cal patients, the primary health care plan for the poor. The state’s community clinics and county clinics are trying [continued on page 7]

## The Julia Bourne Dance Scholarship

Sometimes when your heart breaks, it breaks wide open, expanding beyond time, space and loss. Although Ryan might not express it that way, it is palpable when you meet him. Ryan is a young father who just lost his beloved wife, Julia, who died of brain cancer this past September. Yet he speaks of his love as “unbreakable and eternal, a love that will never die.” He feels Julia living on inside himself and their four-year-old twins. And despite his crushing grief, he has reached out to create a dance scholarship in his wife’s honor, for a little girl in Uncommon Good’s program who, like Julia, lives to dance.

Ryan grew up a few blocks from Uncommon Good and went through the Claremont public schools. A born musician, he attended the famed Berklee College of Music in Boston and in the course of his career played with a series of world class musicians. He met Julia when both were employed as entertainers on Carnival Cruise Line, he making

music and she as a dancer. He remembers the first time he laid eyes on her. She had just walked in to the cruise ship mess hall with the other dancers and he was smitten by her old time movie star beauty and her adorable Newcastle-Under-Lyme British accent. Julia was 26-years-old and had been dancing since the age of six, performing in the U.S., Europe and Asia. Ryan, though still a bit wet behind the ears at age 22, lost no time making his move. He quickly borrowed a presentable pair of shoes and pants from the jazz band drummer and asked Julia out on a date. They had a magical dinner in the port of Cozumel, Mexico, and by their second day together, Ryan “knew it was forever.”

Eventually Ryan and Julia tired of the constant travel of the cruise ship jobs and settled down in Claremont. Julia began teaching pilates and eventually opened her own pilates studio, Bourne Pilates, which remains open and continues [continued on page 5]

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Maddy, the recipient of the Julia Bourne Dance Scholarship.

Photo by Nancy Mintie



# Home for Good

It took Rebecca 79 years to finally find a loving home, but find it she did at Crossroads, the residential facility for women coming out of prison, and the site of two of Uncommon Good's urban farm plots. Rebecca grew up in Bakersfield, the child of a single mom who'd left her husband, an abusive drunk. Unfortunately, she didn't leave soon enough. Her older children had learned their father's violent ways and regularly beat Rebecca up. The child took extra abuse for trying to shield her younger sister, whom she still calls "Baby" even today when "Baby" is 72 years old. To escape the physical and emotional pain, Rebecca started drinking at nine years of age. In adulthood, the alcohol led her into damaging relationships and hurt her ability to parent her own children. Eventually she ended up in prison, along with one of her daughters, a drug addict. At age 79, when she was finally up for parole, it seemed that there was no one left in the world who cared. But that wasn't exactly right. Sister Terry Dodge, the long-time Executive Director of Crossroads, attended her hearing and convinced the parole board to set her free. Rebecca returned with Sister Terry to one of the two homes operated by Crossroads in Claremont. She has settled in happily, cooking meals for the local homeless, helping with clothing and toy drives for children, and attending AA meetings. At last, at 79 years old, Rebecca can say:

"Crossroads has changed me 100%. I've learned new tools, how to have a better life. It's so friendly here. It's a new world for me, a new life that I never had before."

Sister Terry radiates a grounded, loving, maternal energy. To be in her presence is to feel both accepted and inspired. We first got to know each other when she generously offered to let us use the Crossroads yards for our urban agriculture program. We've been growing vegetables there ever since, aided by a grant that Sister Terry obtained from her religious community, the Sisters of St. Louis.

On a recent blazing October afternoon, of a kind for which Southern California is infamous, we sat on the porch of one of the Crossroads houses and talked about how this work had become her life's mission. Like Crossroads resident Rebecca, Sister Terry also had a beloved younger sibling, a brother nine years her junior. Before she entered the convent she had a motorcycle, and she would use it to pick him up from school, which instantly made him one of the coolest kids on campus. The two were exceptionally close. Tragically, however, while he was in high school he was introduced to heroin and became an addict. At times during his addiction, his sister was the only person who knew where he was. When she finally knew that he was ready to accept help, she looked into resources for him when he



Uncommon Good's farmer, Jose Garcia, with Sister Terry Dodge, the Executive Director of Crossroads, at our urban farm plot at the Crossroads home.



Rebecca, a resident of Crossroads, with Sister Terry Dodge.

Photo by Nancy Mintie

"Sister Terry radiates a grounded, loving, maternal energy. To be in her presence is to feel both accepted and inspired."

was paroled from prison and was extremely frustrated to come up empty handed. By that time she had entered the convent and was a teacher. But her experience with her brother inspired her to want to change careers to do something for parolees.

She offered her services to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles but was told that she couldn't be employed in the detention ministry because she was a woman. So she moved to Oakland to volunteer in that archdiocese's prison ministry. Ultimately the Archdiocese of Orange and Crossroads both offered her jobs and she chose Crossroads.

Under her leadership, Crossroads has grown dramatically, providing housing, education, support, counseling and employment training in a homelike environment for 32 women each year. Sometimes the women have served decades in prison for a simple reason such as they happened to be in the car when their idiot boyfriend decided to pull over and rob a liquor store. In such cases they need to be introduced to the trappings of the modern world, such as computers, which may not have been a part of the workplace when they entered prison. Beating all the odds, 86% of Crossroads women are self-sustaining after six years.

Initially, though, Crossroads met with some NIMBY opposition. At one meeting in which hostile neighbors showed up to protest the presence of a Crossroads house, Sister Terry was challenged, "How do you make these felons change their ways?" She responded simply, "I just love them." That her love is powerful and effective is proven by the Crossroads graduates who have gone on to earn Masters and Doctorates and land impressive jobs. But she is just as proud of her elderly residents, such as Rebecca, who are experiencing themselves reborn and giving back by volunteering, and her graduates who have learned how to live simply, happily and productively on limited incomes. "My definition of success," Sister Terry told me, "is that every woman who comes to Crossroads knows she is safe and loved."

And when it comes to the bigger picture, Sister Terry likes to quote the mission of her religious order, which is "to work toward a world healed, unified and transformed." That her work is doing just that has been proven by the change she has wrought in our city, from being a community that was afraid of her residents, to one that made her the Grand Marshal of our Fourth of July parade this year in honor of her transformative work with the Crossroads women.

At the end of our conversation, I spoke to Sister Terry in the vernacular of her faith, asking, "Do you believe we are ever going to create the kingdom of God on this earth?" To which she replied, "Aren't we doing it already?"

Photo by Nancy Mintie



# Musical Prodigies



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Denny and Roger Duran at the Hollywood Bowl.

Uncommon Good has its own home grown Gustavo Dudamel, the young immigrant genius conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. We actually have two of our own Gustavos, the brothers Roger and Denny Duran. Their mother, Marbeli, got an early hint of what was to come when her firstborn, Roger, was watching the Rose Parade with her on TV when he was two-years-old. As he observed one of the youth marching bands go by, little Roger prophesied, “I’m going to be one of those people someday!” From that day forward, his dream of becoming a musician never wavered.

The family’s father was a lover of Mexican Banda music, a lively sound that uses mostly horns and percussion instruments. “He played it all the time at home, so loud you could feel the walls vibrating!” the boys told me. When Roger was a little tyke his dad bought him a drum set and Roger set about pounding on it so enthusiastically that he destroyed it in short order.

When Roger was in the 4th grade and the band teacher came through his classroom asking if anyone wanted to learn an instrument, Roger told me, “Instantly I knew I wanted to do it and I picked the trumpet because it had really stood out for me in my dad’s Banda music.”

The path was not a smooth one for the young trumpet aficionado, however. Annoyed by his practicing, his mother told him to go outside to practice. But this irritated the neighbors, who told him to go back into the house. Poor Roger went back and forth, inside and out, trying to find a place to practice in peace. The family was not able to afford lessons, so he made do with what he could learn at weekly band practice, and tutorials he could find on the internet.

By the time he was in middle school, Roger was such a skilled musician that the music director featured him as a soloist in every concert. When he got to high school he played in two different schools’ marching bands and was chosen to be the lead trumpet player for the Claremont Youth Symphony Orchestra. He played in parades, at Disneyland, at the big regional Band Fest, for sporting events, and at Christmas concerts. He also formed a band of student musicians from Uncommon Good’s music mentoring program to play in the city’s 4th of July parade. It brought tears to my eyes watching our kids march down the town’s main street playing “This Land Is Your Land.” But the pinnacle of Roger’s high school music career was being chosen for the elite Pasadena City College Honor Band to perform at the Rose Parade with the best student musicians from all over Southern California.

Preparation for the Rose Parade was intense. Starting in November, the group would practice every Sunday from 10am to 5pm with only two fifteen minute breaks. Then in December, the group practiced every Saturday and Sunday and every day of the winter break except Christmas, seven hours a day. They practiced playing while marching four miles a day around Dodger Stadium, to get in shape for the 5.5 mile parade. They played their five parade selections incessantly, but Roger says he didn’t get tired of them. “Every time we practiced, I’d find a new nuance in the music,” he explained.

The high point of the parade was turning onto Colorado Blvd. into a vast sea of media cameras. “Fifty photos were being taken of us every second,” Roger explained. “We had timed performance to be playing the most dramatic part of our most dramatic piece right when we passed all the TV cameras. It was an amazing experience!”

In case you are wondering what kind of a student Roger was while pursuing music so intensely, don’t worry. He was burning up the books. In preparation for college, he took seven Advanced Placement tests and earned the highest possible score in three of them:

Calculus AB, Calculus BC and Spanish.

Currently, Roger is 19 and is attending the University of California, Irvine, majoring in music and physics. He’d like to be a film composer and already has a number of compositions to his name on the media website Spotify. Currently he is working on an album for a film about unsung superheroes who have yet to have their own movie. He first discovered classical music through film, as many of an earlier generation discovered it through cartoons. He and his younger brother described a concert of the Claremont Youth Symphony Orchestra in which the musicians played music that had been used in cartoons and the conductor used a carrot as a baton in a homage to Bugs Bunny. At college Roger also has branched out musically and joined the jazz band, becoming acquainted with that genre for the first time and performing with students who have had the benefit of years of private music lessons.

After discussing Roger’s stellar accomplishments, I was a little afraid to turn to his younger brother, the fourteen-year-old Denny, to review his story. I’d heard Denny play the trumpet beautifully at our Uncommon Good talent show, but I feared that he would be overshadowed by his awesome brother. But I needn’t have worried.

Denny did get off to a bit of a slow start, though. When he was a fourth grader, his older brother urged him to join the band, as he had done. Denny thought he would like to learn to play the trombone, but he was still a little guy and was told by the band director that his arms weren’t long enough for that instrument. So he settled for the trumpet since his brother already had one. Roger let him have his instrument and made do with a loaner from school for himself. (It wasn’t until he finished high school and was given a scholarship for leadership and performance from the Claremont Youth Symphony Orchestra that Roger was able to afford a trumpet of his own.) But young Denny found himself bored with the music program at his elementary school because the selections that the band played were so simple and uninspired. So like many a youngster, he resisted practicing.

But when he entered middle school, his passion for music ignited. The band there played interesting popular music that challenged him and that he *[continued on page 4]*



Photo by Duran family

Roger Duran, getting ready to perform in the Rose Bowl parade.



## Musical Prodigies *(con't. from page 3)*

enjoyed. That first summer he also discovered classical music through the flamboyant Dutch violinist, Andre Rieu, the founder and conductor of the Johann Strauss Orchestra. By the seventh grade, Denny had joined the symphonic band and was its section leader for the trumpet players. He also made it into the wind ensemble and the jazz band. Both the Duran brothers started exploring jazz at the same time and would compare notes on the challenges of learning to “swing” (syncopate) the notes. After Roger went off to college, Denny took over his role of training the Uncommon Good 4th of July house band of kids that performs in the local parade.

A turning point came for Denny when he participated in a holiday concert with the wind ensemble from his school. “That was fun,” he thought, “but it would be even more exciting if I had my own holiday band that was all student led!” Though Denny by this point was also a member of the Claremont Youth Symphony Orchestra, he realized that the \$75 annual participation fee made it impossible for many students to join and there weren’t any other opportunities for students to play music in a full orchestra in our area. He wanted his group to be free so that even the lowest income students would not be excluded. So he talked some of his fellow musicians into forming an orchestra and they began to get gigs for holiday fundraisers. But after the holidays ended, they were having so much fun that they didn’t want the music to stop. So they renamed themselves the LaVerne Youth Ensemble and recruited some older high school students to join them and also some younger elementary music students whom they could mentor. They developed a repertoire focused on movie scores, video game soundtracks, and other popular music. The group has grown ever more popular and now is attracting student musicians from all over the region. It has outgrown its hometown name and now needs to come up with a new name for itself to express its larger geographic reach from Fontana to Covina. It has 23 members, including Roger and two Uncommon Good elementary school students who are learning from their “elders,” the high school students in the group. Plans are in the works to include a choral section for the ensemble as well.

Initially, Denny had planned to play trumpet in his band, but then realized that it needed a conductor. He asked his school music teacher for some pointers and then watched videos about conducting and others featuring famous conductors like Gustavo Dudamel. Soon he was conducting his band and also guest conducting for some of the music at school concerts.

And if this all wasn’t enough, last November Denny’s school and its Parent Teacher Association held an arts competition. Denny decided to branch out into writing music and composed a waltz for the contest. It won first prize. He then was approached by his first music teacher from his elementary school who asked him to compose something for the youngsters that would be fun and interesting to play so that they would not lose interest in music as Denny initially had done at that age. So he composed a piece for his alma mater that was easy enough for the beginning students, but still fun to play.

Recently, I had the exhilarating experience of taking Roger and Denny to the 100th anniversary concert of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, with Gustavo Dudamel conducting. The boys had never been to the Bowl and had never seen



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Roger and Denny Duran leading Uncommon Good’s youth band, which was created by Roger, performing in Claremont’s 4th of July parade.

Dudamel live. The concert was spectacular, featuring classical music, new music, jazz with the great Herbie Hancock, pop music superstar Katy Perry, and fireworks. The boys were enraptured, but the unexpected climax came at the end of the concert when Dudamel said that he had an extra treat for us, a legend waiting in the wings. Roger gasped, anticipating who it might be. When Dudamel introduced the guest, the great film composer and conductor John Williams, Denny and Roger leaped to their feet, roaring with excitement. Seeing this living musical genius, who had been such an inspiration for them, and whose film scores they had played for years, was almost too wonderful to be believed.

Even the great Gustavo Dudamel and John Williams were once young boys, in love with music, working their way up in the field. So who knows what Roger and Denny may do? Stay tuned!



Photo by Nancy Mintie

The LaVerne Youth Ensemble, which Denny Duran created and conducts.



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## The Julia Bourne Dance Scholarship *(con't. from page 1)*

to provide excellent service upholding Julia's high standards. Julia was extraordinarily devoted to her clients' health and well-being. Ryan recalls:

"She was so incredibly committed to her clients. It was an amazing thing to see. After her passing, I found all of these notebooks she kept detailing each client's ailments and the workout routine to make them whole again. She was meticulous about it."

Four years ago the couple joyfully welcomed their twins, Lilly and William into their lives. Yet only two years later Julia was diagnosed with brain cancer. She underwent three surgeries, with Ryan taking care of her and the children. The day she died, he was playing her favorite music for her, the music she had loved to dance to, by Chopin and Tchaikovsky. Though Julia was in a coma, he bent down, and told her he loved her. She made a verbal response and then passed.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Evey and Maddy dance together.

We were stunned when Ryan reached out to us from the depths of his devastating loss and we learned that he wanted to start a dance scholarship in honor of his wife.

Though I never knew Julia, I can only imagine that she must have been very like the young girl from Uncommon Good's program who will be receiving the Julia Bourne Dance Scholarship. Maddy is an eleven-year-old whose nature is so infused with dance that she breaks out into dance moves in mid-sentence. Her hands are in constant graceful motion, punctuating her conversation. Talking to her is rather like having a chat with a butterfly.

My first conversation with Maddy, however, was disconcerting. She and her mother, Evey, had come to our office to discuss the scholarship. But when I asked Evey if she had been interested in dance as a young girl, both she and Maddy started to cry. I was bewildered until Maddy composed herself and explained that though her mother had longed to be a dancer, she was never able to realize this dream because she was needed to take care of her three younger siblings while their parents worked, and besides, a local dance teacher had broken her heart by telling her dismissively that she didn't have "the right kind of body" to be a dancer.

But Evey's dream deferred has been reborn in her daughter. This first became apparent at a family wedding when Maddy was five-years-old. The band struck up a traditional Mexican dance song and the adults got up to dance. Evey told Maddy to sit down and stay out of the way, but she disobeyed and ran up onto the stage and executed all of the dance steps perfectly.

"All I have to do is see a dance once and then I can do it," Maddy told me proudly. I told her that the old time child movie star Shirley Temple had the same gift and was able to copy the dance steps of one of her co-stars, the great tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, after seeing them only once. Maddy laughed, "One time when I curled my hair my sister called me the Mexican Shirley Temple!"

When Maddy started school, her innocent joyous nature unfortunately made her a target of bullies. Her older sister, Melyssa, noticed her sadness and talked to her about it. "You look sad, except you you're dancing," she said. Maddy admitted that she was struggling to speak up for herself and could only really express her feelings through dancing. Her sister encouraged her, saying, "I believe in you. You could be the best dancer in the world!" Maddy took this encouragement to heart and now says she's even grateful for having had the experience of being bullied because it made her find herself through dance and learn to trust her inner strength. Wise words from an eleven-year-old!

And strong she is. She dances four hours every day. "I don't have to tell her to practice," her mother says. "I have to tell her to stop practicing! One time she was in a dance class and was coughing and obviously sick. But when I told her I was taking her home, she burst into tears!"

Though they want to support her dream, the family has been struggling to pay for dance lessons, shoes, and recital costumes for Maddy. Her father drives his own truck for a living and her mother is a caregiver and a hair stylist. Money is tight and dance classes are expensive. Now, however, with the scholarship, Maddy's dreams have been given a big green light and she has set her sights on attending Julliard. She wants to be a professional dancer and then open a studio to share her passion with future generations.

"It's amazing to know that there are people who care for us," Evey told me, referring to those who have donated generously for the scholarship. "We want to thank them with all our hearts and let them know that every dollar we can put into dancing for Maddy means the world to her."

And so Julia's light dances on. . . .



Photo by Carlos Carrillo

Uncommon Good student Fatima sells one of her paintings at the Dia De La Muerte art exhibit at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena.

# Thank You, Friends!

Uncommon Good offers its most grateful thanks to the following businesses and foundations which have made generous recent grants to support its education and urban farming programs that serve close to 1,000 low-income students and families each year:



Photo by Cris Lin-Cobos

Children enjoy Uncommon Good's healthy eating booth at Condit School in Claremont.

Beach Point Capital ■ Claremont Presbyterian Church ■ Decision Quest ■ Draper Family Foundation  
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 Samech Aleph Lamed Inc. ■ Sidney Stern Memorial Trust ■ St. Paul's Episcopal Church of Pomona  
 The University Club of Claremont ■ TRUECar ■ U.S. Bank Foundation ■ Union Bank Foundation  
 Wells Fargo Foundation

# What Do We Do?

1. Connect to College/CAUSA (CCC): Over 850 low-income students and their parents are served through CCC. Starting in the 4th grade, students are given one-to-one mentoring, tutoring, educational enrichment, leadership training, community service opportunities, and extensive help preparing for and applying to college. Parents are provided with social services, educational opportunities, and leadership training. 100% of Uncommon Good students go to college, even as 41.5% of their socio-economic peers are dropping out of high school. The CAUSA component of the program is an urban farm enterprise that produces organically grown fruits and vegetables for CCC families and the community at large. It also provides real world learning opportunities for CCC students and parents in the areas of ecology, health, and running a small business.

2. Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED): This program helps idealistic doctors, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists repay their sky-high educational loans, some as high as \$700,000, so they can accept the lowest paying jobs in the medical profession, those serving the poor in community clinics throughout the southland. MED also has a health career pipeline through which Uncommon Good students are introduced to careers in medicine and helped to prepare for and to apply to medical school.

3. Whole Earth Building (WEB): This is Uncommon Good's office, a beautiful first-of-its-kind green building that was constructed by hand using little more than on-site earth, by Uncommon Good staff, children, parents, and hundreds of community members. It continues to receive visitors from every continent (except Antarctica!) who come to learn how to create buildings that keep people safe from natural disasters and do not harm the earth.



Photo by Cris Lin-Cobos

Zadkiel shares his enthusiasm for Uncommon Good's fresh produce.



## African-American Physician *(con't. from page 1)*

valiantly to serve these otherwise unwanted patients, but the cost of living in the state, and especially in California, is working against them. The clinics pay the lowest salaries in the medical profession and young people coming out of medical school commonly owe vast sums of money, from \$500,000 to \$725,000 in educational debt. The high cost of living in Los Angeles, the high levels of school debt, and the relatively low salaries in the community clinics are the perfect storm keeping young people from being able to go into low-income communities to practice medicine where they are needed most. In a related issue, the cost of college and medical school is keeping African-Americans and Latinos out of the medical profession disproportionately. Only 4% of doctors in this country are African-American and 4% are Latino.

For the past 18 years, Uncommon Good has been trying to help through its Medicine for the Disadvantaged program, providing educational loan repayment assistance on a modest scale to idealistic young doctors, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists who serve the poor through the community clinic system. Sympathetic foundations and organizations, such as The California Wellness Foundation, the California Community Foundation, the S. Mark Taper Foundation, the Rose Hills Foundation, and QueensCare have provided funding for these efforts.

This year the Los Angeles Care Health Plan (LA Care) stepped up in a big way. It created the largest and most ambitious program ever conceived to address the primary care physician shortage. Its Elevating the Safety Net Physician Loan Repayment Program is offering up to \$5,000 a month in educational loan repayment assistance to new primary care doctors who agree to come to Los Angeles County and serve the Medi-Cal population. The program is being administered by Uncommon Good.

To doctors such as James, who together with his wife owes nearly a million dollars in educational debt, this unprecedented new program will enable him to live out his calling to be a family doctor for the poor.

His was a calling that almost died aborning, however. Where he grew up in Nigeria his parents owned their own janitorial business that had a contract in what was the first medical school in that country. He couldn't help but notice that some of the doctors were a bit, well, . . . .odd:

"Doctors aren't always the most fun people to be around. My mom said they were weird because they had to read so many big books. Some of them also had big egos which turned me off."

But his father, who never had a chance to go beyond middle school, and his mother, who only finished high school, were keen on their children going to college, even if they didn't think they should be doctors. But when it came time for James to go, political and economic unrest in the country resulted in a strike that closed all of the colleges. He wanted to try to come to the U.S. for an education, but 9/11 had just happened. When he applied for a visa to this country he was denied. He then tried to get one for Britain, but that was denied also. Finally, on his third attempt he was granted a U.S. student visa on condition that he prepaid college tuition up front. In college he reconsidered his harsh judgment of the medical profession and decided to pursue medicine to give him a way to help people. While in training, he passed up more "prestigious" appointments and did his residency in California's San Joaquin Valley among immigrant farmworkers. There he demonstrated his leadership abilities and was appointed Chief Resident. Even more significantly, he fell in love with the people he served:

"The patients were so grateful. They didn't act entitled. They'd thank me for saving their lives and I would tell them that it wasn't me, it was the medicine! I felt I could really do some good working for people like this."

So let's go back to my question about his intersecting identities as doctor, immigrant, and African-American man. To my surprise, James initially laughed at the question, but then gave me a multi-layered response.

"I just plunge in. But I know I've been an encouragement for others. When I was Chief Resident, two African-American medical students quietly told me that they'd chosen this residency because they saw me there."

"I do encounter bias. One patient, a Latina, told me to my face that when I first came in to the exam room, she didn't think much of me. But by the end of the visit she had changed her mind and decided she wanted me to be her doctor! When I encounter prejudice or abusive behavior, my response is to be even more professional. I always try to treat people the way I would want to be treated, even if they are yelling and insulting me, like some of the drug addicts do."

"Sometimes it is lonely, though. One time an Asian doctor confided in me that he was lonely and ill at ease because he was the only Asian in his residency program. I told him this is my reality all the time! There are so few African-Americans in medicine that I make sure when I get African-American kids as patients, that I talk to them about their future and try to be a role model for them. I also do this for Latino kids."

I followed up this question with one about his most memorable patients. James responded with a string of poignant anecdotes. There was the story of the non-English speaking Chinese schizophrenic with cancer who could not be treated because he refused to take medications, but who ultimately was helped when James convinced him to undergo surgery and chemotherapy. There was the teenage girl who would not talk to him for the longest time until he gently elicited from her that she did not trust men because her father had abandoned the family. There was the depressed patient who cried for the first fifteen minutes of her twenty minute appointment. And there was the young woman with inexplicable symptoms who finally confessed that she had been raped in front of her child.

I then asked James what the most surprising thing about the practice of medicine had been for him.

"The most surprising thing about being a doctor is like that line from the Eagles' song "Hotel California" that you can check in but you can't check out. You think about your patients constantly, and are always second guessing yourself about whether you could have done more to help them. I lie awake at night worrying about them."

When asked with the loan repayment assistance award would mean to him, James talked about the incredible pressures of the medical profession.

"Some of us are working three jobs to try to pay off our loans. The financial stress and stress of caring for patients in life and death situations leads to a lot of alcohol abuse and depression in the profession. When I was a resident, two of the surgeons in the program committed suicide. But we're not supposed to talk about this because as doctors we're supposed to be strong and know everything."

James said that having financial help from the LA Care program will significantly relieve his financial stress. Now he and his wife, who have a three-month-old daughter, will be able to think about putting down roots and finding a home. The pressure to leave the work he loves, serving the poorest of the poor, for a better paying job, has been alleviated. He explained:

"Doctors are terrible about dealing with money. But once I finished residency the reality of the cost of my education hit and I was looking down into a big financial hole. This award has taken a big big load off my shoulders."

I came away from our interview inspired, as I always am, by the young people serving on the front lines of the medical profession. But in addition, I am so very grateful to LA Care Health Plan for making it possible for these veritable angels of mercy to carry out their missions of healing among those who need them most in our communities.



Dr. Agajbe with Penny Griego of LA Care Health Plan

Photo by Nancy Mintie