

# **Wrenetha Julion, PhD, MPH, RN, FADLN, FAAN, CNL**

The Michelle and Larry Goodman, MD,  
Professor of Health Equity



## **Advancement of Nursing**

I continue to serve as a nurse scholar and associate dean for Equity and Inclusion in the Rush College of Nursing. My ongoing professional mission combines my research, focused on promoting the well-being of families, with my commitment to upholding and advancing the tenets of diversity, equity and inclusion. My research has been supported by the National Institutes of Health, or NIH; the Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS; the Josiah Macy Foundation; the Genentech Foundation; and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. To advance my work to eliminate health disparities for Black mothers, I have been appointed to the Illinois Department of Public Health's Illinois Task Force on Infant and Maternal Mortality Among African Americans Community Engagement Subcommittee. Key components of these endeavors include community-building to raise awareness, improving advocacy and patient/provider relationships, and advocating for father and family involvement throughout the childbearing period and the child's life. My research focused on father involvement in prenatal care seeks to advance these goals. The National Black Nurses Association has also selected me as an inaugural fellow in the Academy of Diversity Leaders in Nursing to further my commitment to celebrating the importance of the rich diversity of the nursing profession.

## **Research**

Thanks to your generous support, I have been able to participate in multiple activities that intentionally partner with Black families and communities to decrease the devastation caused by maternal and infant deaths. These activities have contributed to increased awareness and engagement. Endowment support has funded my collaboration with **Santosh Basapur, PhD**, assistant professor in the Department of Family & Preventive Medicine, to utilize design thinking as a



means to involve fathers and the community in generating solutions for the Black maternal health crisis. Design thinking involves integrating community members into the design process, from initial ideation to final implementation, ensuring that solutions reflect their needs and preferences. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and recognizes the inherent power of community members to actively participate in shaping their environment. It also allows for a deeper understanding of community dynamics and challenges, leading to more effective and sustainable solutions. Dr. Basapur and I have developed the MOCHA project (Men Of Color eradicating maternal Health Adversities) to actively engage fathers in protecting the lives of Black mothers and infants. The MOCHA project, which is ongoing, could not have been realized without your generous support.

I continue my current research study, “Preparing for Parenthood: A Father Inclusive Model of Prenatal Care,” as co-principal investigator. This study is funded by the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the Department of Health and Human Services. I am also the principal investigator on the Transforming Health Sciences Education through Health Equity, Antiracist Training (HEAT) grant, funded by the Genentech Foundation. HEAT workshops are designed to increase racial justice in health care by ensuring that health educators are prepared to teach the next generation of learners to be antiracist health care providers. Our initial workshop series included 17 participants who developed four team projects that demonstrated the application of antiracist principles in the classroom. They emerged with a greater sense of themselves as educators prepared to utilize equity-focused learning principles in classroom, clinical and research environments.

## Education and Community Outreach

My educational endeavors have included written, virtual and media-related activities. I participated in two podcasts this year to raise awareness about the Black maternal health crisis. Dr. Basapur and I appeared on the [Thrive Alive Podcast](#) to highlight the vital role of fathers as lifesaving team members in the fight to help Black mothers thrive. I also partnered on a podcast for the D’Nasha Harrison Show to raise community awareness of the devastating impact of maternal death. In the episode “The Black Maternal Mortality & Morbidity Crisis and the Role of Fathers in Turning the Tide,” Erica Riley tells the powerful story of the loss of her daughter and discusses efforts to bring more attention to the issue. Dr. Basapur and I conducted a design studio entitled “Black Fathers as



Advocates for Black Maternal Health,” which was held at Rush University during Black Maternal Health Week.

As an invited podium presenter for the Provost Research Seminar Series, I described my career-long efforts to center fathers and families through innovation, research and programs. I presented at the Institute for Translational Medicine Community Grand Rounds on Black maternal health. I presented the workshop “Health Equity Public Policy Implications of Black Maternal Mortality and Morbidity” to Nurses Running for Elected Office. Two of my key publications this year include an article focused on decolonizing nursing education in a special issue of *Nursing Outlook* and co-authorship on “The Oral Histories of the Only Three Black Past Presidents of the American Nurses Association,” also published in *Nursing Outlook*.

My education and community outreach activities over the past year include serving as the chairperson of Rush’s application team for the American Hospital Association’s Foster G. McGaw Prize. This prestigious award recognizes hospitals that have distinguished themselves by collaborating with community-based initiatives to combat health disparities. Our application, Rush’s first, was selected as one of four finalists, culminating in a site visit that showcased five Rush/community partnerships. The winner will be announced at the 2025 AHA Leadership Summit in Nashville in 2025.

## The Year Ahead: 2025 and Beyond

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, Black women are three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women. This devastating outcome is far too common in the United States, where approximately 700 women die from pregnancy or delivery complications each year. According to the CDC, 80 percent of these deaths are preventable. Fathers can play a crucial role in reducing maternal deaths. However, this calls for bringing together men, including recent dads, dads who have faced Black maternal health issues with their partners and dads interested in the topic who want to be actively involved in addressing this systemic issue. Our goal is to increase involvement from fathers and community members. Along with the involvement of fathers, health care providers must evolve in their approach to this vulnerable group by considering structural and interpersonal factors in the health care environment that contribute to the problem.



Quality improvement initiatives must not be limited to preventing mortality and morbidity but must also consider the entire birth experience so that Black mothers can leave the hospital having had *their* ideal birth experience. In the year ahead, we will prioritize efforts to address Black maternal and child mortality and morbidity, including focusing on traditional prenatal care, newborn care, neonatal intensive care, staff-related barriers and facilitators, and procedures used throughout inpatient and outpatient settings.

Improving maternal and child health outcomes calls for a transformational approach and expanded health care teams that include fathers, families, community members, doulas, community health workers and midwives. The diversity of individuals in these professions must also be expanded. We intend to continue our work with the community to protect mothers and infants by spreading the word and partnering with fathers.

## With Gratitude

I am both thankful and humbled by the trust that has been placed in me with my ascendance as the endowed professor holder. I am committed to making sure that childbearing is safe and equitable for all mothers, that all babies are born at their healthiest, and that they grow into healthy, productive adults. Your support has invigorated my professional growth while directly altering the health trajectory of mothers, fathers and families, and implementing equitable health care practices to recalibrate health professions' education, clinical practice and research.