

These LI black female doctors break barriers

6 who overcame racism, sexism to rise in elite fields

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Dr. Allison McLarty knew as a 10-year-old she wanted to become a physician and confirmed that decision after a childhood accident landed her in a hospital, an environment she found fascinating.

She grew up to become a leading Long Island cardiothoracic surgeon.

Large parts of her story — nearly chapter and verse — are shared by a growing list of Long Island women who are breaking barriers in medicine as well.

The thread linking one story to another is that each is a black woman in an elite medical specialty at a major medical center. This, in a region where black doctors less than a generation ago, regardless of gender, largely practiced in minority neighborhoods.

Just as McLarty knew she wanted to be a physician early on, so did Dr. Janna Andrews, a radiation oncologist.

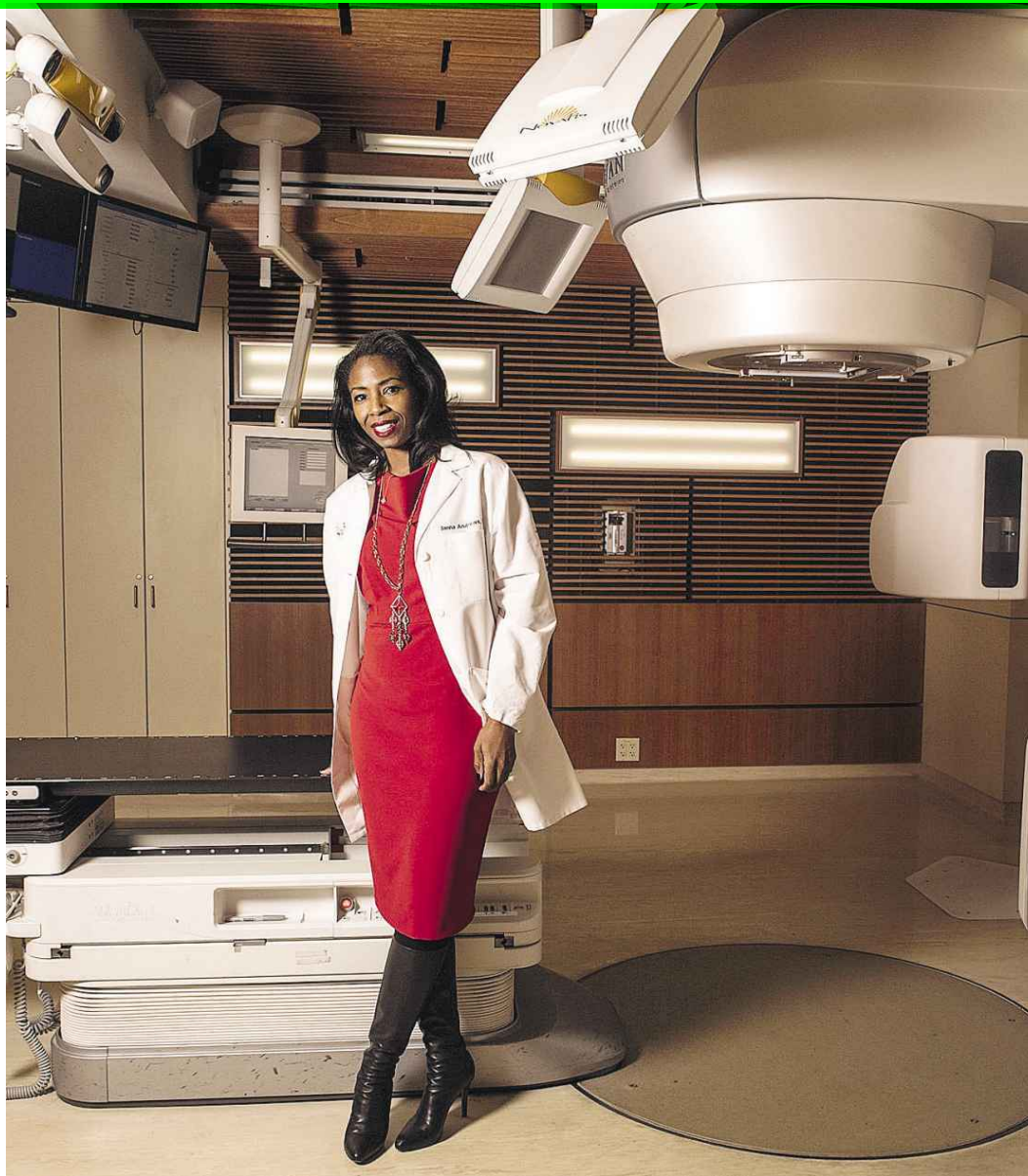
Dr. D'Andrea Joseph's childhood dream was to be a physician. She is a specialist in trauma surgery.

Dr. Pilar Stevens-Cohen became a cardiologist and a specialist in echocardiography. She, too, knew early on that being a doctor was her destiny.

And no one could tell Dr. Jennifer Mieres as a child that she wouldn't become a doctor. She knew it. Mieres practiced as a nuclear cardiologist before becoming a professor, dean, health care executive, author and Emmy-nominated filmmaker.

Their roles in medicine arrive 154 years after Rebecca Crumpler became the first black woman in the United States to graduate from medical school, a gender-segregated institution established in the 19th century.

These doctors say they have encountered the twin evils of



DR. JANNA ANDREWS is a radiation oncologist at Northwell Health's Cancer Institute.

racism and sexism, but have defied each to ensure excellent patient care.

Dr. Allison McLarty

"I wound up in cardiothoracic surgery because I fell in love with it," said McLarty, who heads thoracic aortic surgery at the Stony Brook Heart Institute, a division of Stony Brook

University Hospital, where she also is co-director of the ventricular assist device program.

She told a recent Black History Month gathering at Stony Brook University that she was discouraged from seeking a career in surgery by a fellow medical student at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, who said, "As a black

woman, you can't be a surgeon."

McLarty persisted — and succeeded — becoming one of a small number of women practicing cardiothoracic surgery in the United States.

"There aren't a lot of women in cardiothoracic surgery, period. There is a sea of thousands of men," McLarty said.

She is the first black woman

to practice as a cardiothoracic surgeon on Long Island. She still marvels at the new lease on life the system known as a left ventricular assist device — an LVAD — provides for desperately sick heart patients. She has seen many in heart failure rebound with a pump that forces oxygenated blood through their bodies.

"When I went to medical school I was enthralled with surgery, and when I reached my second year as a surgical resident at Columbia University, I was certain. It was in the days when we worked very hard, 26 to 30 hours at a pop," she said of the 1990s.

"I would see these patients who would come in so very sick and in a week they were going home. It was like magic. It is still like magic," she said.

McLarty, originally from Jamaica, came to the United States after high school. She majored in chemistry at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. The divorced mother of two isn't surprised that her two children are uninterested in medicine, given the demands on time and family life. Her daughter, a student at Brown University, hopes to become a journalist; her son, in high school, wants to be a pilot.

Dr. Janna Andrews

About 31 miles south of Stony Brook is the Radiation Medicine division at Northwell Health's Cancer Institute. There, Andrews treats cancer patients in need of radiotherapy.

Her methods of treatment involve the institute's state-of-the-art linear accelerator and a technique known as brachytherapy, the use of high-energy "seeds" that are implanted internally in or near a tumor site.

The accelerator is a large device that delivers finely focused, high-energy electrons to destroy errant cancer cells.

Andrews, originally from Queens but who spent part of her childhood upstate, said her career choice made history in her family. "I am the first physician in my family," she said.



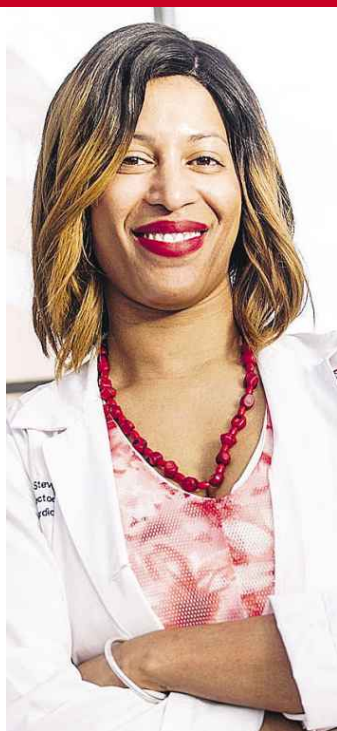
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DR. D'ANDREA JOSEPH is chief of trauma and acute care surgery at NYU Winthrop Hospital in Mineola.



BARRY SLOAN

DR. ALLISON McLARTY heads thoracic aortic surgery at the Stony Brook Heart Institute.



NEWSDAY / ALEANDRA VILLA

DR. PILAR STEVENS-COHEN heads echocardiography at South Nassau Communities Hospital.



JOHNNY MILANO

DR. JENNIFER MIERES is a senior vice president at Northwell Health's Center for Equity of Care in Lake Success.

bombed," Joseph said of her last year at St. John's University.

Joseph, having lived much of her life in Dominica where most of the population is black, did not encounter racism until she tried to find housing on Long Island to attend Stony Brook School of Medicine, she said.

In one instance, a woman who had rejected her as a renter because of her race, wound up as her patient when Joseph was a medical student doing clinical rotations at Stony Brook. The doctor said she remained professional and did not allow herself to think of the patient as the woman who denied her housing.

"She was a very sick person at that point; she was dying," Joseph said.

Dr. Jennifer Mieres

Back at Northwell, Mieres is a senior vice president at the health care giant's Center for Equity of Care in Lake Success and Northwell's chief diversity and inclusion officer. She also is a dean and professor of cardiology at Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell.

"I decided to go into medicine when I was 7," Mieres said. "My grandfather died of a heart attack, and I was very close to him. It was unexpected and I was devastated. I said at that moment: I am going to be a doctor and help people."

Mieres, a graduate of Bennington College and Boston University School of Medicine, has had a wide-ranging career, which has included patient care, heart research, authoring scientific papers, studying health disparities and now recruiting doctors at Northwell. "This is my second time at Northwell," said Mieres, who worked there in the 1990s in cardiology before being recruited by NYU Langone.

She is a specialist in the area of medicine known as nuclear cardiology. The discipline involves a range of techniques involving short-lived radioactive tracers to assess blood flow through the heart. But Mieres, a native of Trinidad, has given up this arcane area of medicine to pursue her executive role at Northwell.

She is the mother of a teen daughter and the wife of a psychiatrist. But she also found time to co-author a consumer health book titled "Six S.T.E.P.S. in Six Weeks to Heart-Healthy Living."

Mieres said she has built her life and career around three pillars, which has helped her immensely: practicing excellent medicine, conducting clinical research and performing community service.

"My mother was always supportive, especially in the area of how education can support you and change your life."

Nevertheless, an adviser at medical school bristled when Andrews told him that she wanted to pursue radiation oncology as a specialty. He told her primary care would be a better bet, saying young black doctors should go into general medical care and serve communities in need.

"At first I thought that I wanted to be an OB/GYN, but I really didn't like delivering babies," Andrews said.

What captivated her, she said, is the complexity of radiation oncology.

At Northwell, she conducts scientific research and treats patients with breast cancer as well as gynecologic and gastrointestinal malignancies.

Andrews said there aren't many other black radiation oncologists. "This [specialty] is white-male dominated," said Andrews, who holds an undergraduate degree in molecular biology from Princeton University and a medical degree from Temple University's medical school.

"I sit on a committee of the American Society of Therapeutic Radiation Oncology to introduce minority [medical] students to radiation oncology with the hope that they will consider it," she said.

Andrews and other black female physicians on Long Island

who are pioneers in elite specialties say there are few people like themselves when they attend scientific meetings in their fields.

Dr. Barbara Ross-Lee

Nowhere on Long Island is the image of a lone, trailblazing black, female physician more stark than in the portrait gallery at NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine in Old Westbury.

There, the gold-framed image of Dr. Barbara Ross-Lee hangs amid other doctors of identical rank.

Hers, however, is the only portrait of a woman and the only person of color. Ross-Lee, who served as dean, vice president and professor, retired last year after 16 years at the college. She is the nation's first dean of an osteopathic medical school.

Ross-Lee, sister of singer Diana Ross, told Newsday in 2013 that she would never abandon medicine. She has since left the Island for Minnesota, where she is working with a team that is converting an abandoned elementary school into a new osteopathic medical college.

Dr. Pilar Stevens-Cohen

Stevens-Cohen, meanwhile, is a graduate of Mount Sinai's Icahn School of Medicine and director of echocardiography at South Nassau Communities Hospital in Oceanside.

Echocardiography is the science of using ultrasound waves



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to investigate cardiac activity. Stevens-Cohen said she loves the beauty and complexity of the human heart and has dedicated much of her life to knowing it in intimate detail.

The divorced mother of two children, a son and a daughter, grew up in Elmont. Her mother is Jamaican; her father Puerto Rican. She speaks fluent Spanish, but she considers herself a black American.

Stevens-Cohen will be the cardiology coordinator, teaching medical students from Icahn who will be trained at South Nassau as part of its recent affiliation with Mount Sinai. Because of that role, she now has the title assistant professor of medicine.

Although she does not experience it much now, Stevens-Cohen said she has encountered white patients in the past who did not want to be treated by a black physician.

"You get a tough coat of skin," Stevens-Cohen said. "You think that you're in medicine — this noble field — and that it would be the last place where you would find racism. But people don't change their outlook just because they're sick."

Her daughter, who is only 9, is convinced that she also will be a cardiologist.

Dr. D'Andrea Joseph

In Mineola, Joseph, who is chief of trauma and acute care surgery at NYU Winthrop Hospital, graduated from Stony Brook School of Medicine.

She also trained in the Shock Trauma program at the University of Maryland. The faculty there has gained an international reputation for rescuing severely injured patients whom they describe as "at the edge of life."

Joseph, who was born in Dominica, a tiny island in the Caribbean, said her role as an expert in trauma medicine is to use all means necessary to save injured patients.

Like McLarty, Joseph left the Caribbean to attend college. She finished in three years instead of four and made the dean's list in two out of the three years. "My mother died, and I kind of