

Nathalie McDowell Johnson (1959-)

By Steve Duckworth

Dr. Nathalie McDowell Johnson, a dancer and physician, moved to Oregon to focus on women's breast health and cancer education. She is known for her empathetic treatment style, based in large part on her personal experience with cancer. A practicing surgical oncologist, Johnson is the medical director of Legacy Cancer Institute and Legacy Breast Health Centers in Portland and a clinical professor of surgery at Oregon Health & Science University. She was instrumental in developing the Good Samaritan Comprehensive Breast Center in 1999 and pioneered the development of the Legacy Health Tumor Bank in 2009. Her contributions to women's breast health in Oregon, as well as to the state's cultural landscape, are considerable.

Born on June 20, 1959, in Washington, D.C., Johnson grew up on St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Her mother instilled in her a love of the arts, and she was enrolled in ballet classes and attended plays, operas, and musicals. Johnson began her professional life as a dancer with the Ballet Theatre of the Virgin Islands and spent a summer in New York City with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. After that summer, however, she "decided medicine was probably easier," she later said, and enrolled in Howard University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in radiation therapy technology in 1980.

Johnson attended the Medical College of Virginia, graduating in 1986 and completed her residency and a surgical internship at the University of Southern California (1986-1992). She moved to Portland in 1992 and began a long tenure at OHSU, though she remained on staff at USC in the Department of Surgery until 1995. At OHSU, Johnson rose from surgical clinical instructor in 1992 to a full professor by 2004. She began her work with Legacy in 1996, serving as the medical director and organizer as well as a board member for the Legacy Good Samaritan Foundation.

In 2013, Johnson was diagnosed with HER2-positive breast cancer, an aggressive type of the disease. She chose to have chemotherapy before surgery and credits the experience with giving her a deeper understanding of what patients go through during treatment. Her mother, Lucy George, had also survived breast cancer, and Johnson looked to her when deciding to share her story with patients when she sees it would be beneficial.

Johnson served as the Commissioner of Health for the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1995-1996 and serves on numerous boards, including the Oregon Medical Board, the American Society of Breast Surgeons, the OHSU Knight Legacy Health Cancer Collaborative, and the Susan G. Komen Oregon/Southwest Washington affiliate. Among her many society memberships are the American Society of Breast Surgeons, the Society of Surgical Oncology, and the International Society of Surgeons. Johnson frequently gives public speeches, presents at conferences, and publishes her research, which includes studies on treating cancer patients in community-based medical centers.

Governor John A. Kitzhaber appointed Johnson to the Oregon Cultural Trust Board in 2014. She has a keen interest in arts therapy, especially for cancer patients, and is an advocate of increasing access to the arts for underserved populations (those who lack access to or the ability to afford cultural endeavors). In 2017, Dr. Nathalie Johnson was honored as an Oregon History Maker by the Oregon Historical Society. She is married and has two children.

Sources

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