



## *‘Immortal Life’ Author Visits East Baltimore*

It was standing room only at the St. Frances Academy Community Center on February 22, 2010 for science writer Rebecca Skloot’s visit to East Baltimore as part of her book tour for [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#).

Henrietta Lacks was an East Baltimore resident and cervical cancer patient in the early 1950s at Johns Hopkins Hospital, where cells taken from her tumor became the first “immortal” human cells grown in culture and led to breakthroughs in cell research related to cancer, AIDS, the effects of radiation and more. Her family was unaware that her cells, now known worldwide as ‘HeLa’ cells, had been used for research

until more than twenty years after her death. In her book, Skloot chronicles the life of Henrietta Lacks and explores issues of informed consent, race, and access to health care.

Skloot says she became interested in the story of Henrietta Lacks as a teenager when she first learned about HeLa cells during a basic biology class. Her teacher had explained how HeLa cells were one of the most important tools in medicine and that they were named for the woman they came from: a black woman named Henrietta Lacks.

“That was the moment I became obsessed with Henrietta,” writes Skloot on her website.



Author Rebecca Skloot reads from [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#) to a packed house at the St. Frances Academy Community Center.

More than ten years later, for her MFA thesis in creative nonfiction, Skloot began to delve into the legacy of HeLa

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## *Meet the UHI’s Community-University Collaborating Committee (CUCC)*



On March 23 of this year, Congressman Elijah E. Cummings witnessed President Obama’s signing of the *Patient Protection and*

*Affordable Care Act* (PPACA)—a bill the Congressman calls “the most significant piece of health care legislation since the enactment of Medicare in 1965.” Major provisions of the PPACA include coverage for those who become ill or have preexisting health conditions, tax credits for small businesses to make employee coverage more affordable, coverage for young people up to age 26 on their parents’ insurance policy, and free preventive services under Medicare. The bill will also provide \$11 billion to community health centers, allowing for improved care for chronic conditions, while preventing unnecessary emergency room visits.

Congressman Cummings represents Maryland’s 7th District, which encompasses portions of Howard County, Baltimore County, and Baltimore City—including much of East Baltimore. Now serving his seventh term in the U.S. House of Representatives, Congressman Cummings has been at the forefront of the national health care debate, petitioning for improved and greater access to quality, affordable health care for all Americans, and especially all Marylanders. On his website, Congressman Cummings lists the benefits of the PPACA for his congressional district. For example in the 7th District alone, the bill will extend coverage to 28,000 uninsured residents and will guarantee that 9,600 residents with pre-existing conditions can obtain coverage.

In addition to providing improved access to health care coverage, the bill includes legislation to better address the mounting racial health disparities

across the nation. Specifically, it includes language initially introduced by Congressman Cummings and Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr., (D-III.) in 2009 as part of the *Health Equity and Accountability Through Research Act*. The legislation effectively elevates the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NCMHD) to the

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## *Meet the CUCC*

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level of an Institute, giving it authority over all NIH-supported health disparities activities and funds to more effectively address health disparities in minority communities.

“Whether African Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, or Asians and Pacific Islanders, minorities in our country are more severely affected by diseases than our white counterparts across the board,” Cummings said. “Elevating the NCMHD to the Institute level and providing its Director with clear authority over health disparity issues will empower NIH to better address the disparities that are killing our communities.”

A native of Baltimore, Congressman Cummings began his career of public service in the Maryland House of Delegates, where he served for sixteen years. He earned his Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science from Howard University, and graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law. He is a former chairman and current member of the Congressional Black Caucus, and is a co-founder and chairman of the Congressional Caucus on Drug Policy. He also serves on the U.S. Naval Academy Board of Visitors, the Morgan State University Board of Regents, the Maryland Zoo Board of Trustees, the Baltimore Aquarium Board of Trustees, the Baltimore Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America Board of Directors, and the Yale-Howard Nursing Partnership Center to Reduce Health Disparities by Self and Family Management Advisory Committee. He is an active member of New Psalmist Baptist Church.

As a senior member of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, the congressman says he is proud to have been a member of the 111th Congress.

“The 111th Congress has made historic progress, working with President Obama to take America in a New Direction,” Cummings writes on his website. “We are working to turn our economy around and create good jobs; to make common sense reforms to how Wall Street does business; to make quality health insurance affordable for every American; and to launch a clean energy jobs revolution that makes America more secure. These efforts are being tackled with fiscal discipline and accountability.”

The UHI shares Congressman Cummings’ commitment and vision for Baltimore and is grateful for his continued leadership as part of our CUCC.

The CUCC provides guidance and assistance to the UHI by ensuring that the priorities of the UHI are in line with those of the University and the community.

## *Elroy Christopher: Figuring It Out in East Baltimore*

*By Lauren Zerbe*

I met Elroy Christopher for the first time only last year. It was September, about six months after the inauguration of Johns Hopkins University President Daniels. That afternoon, 40 community representatives from East Baltimore were coming together at the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition’s (HEBCAC) Delegate Hattie Harrison Community Center to discuss with President Daniels their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in strengthened community-university partnerships and collaborations. Part of my responsibility that afternoon was to hook up and test the microphone and speaker system—a daunting task for someone who has trouble hooking up my home cable box. As I struggled with switches and cords and knobs, still without sound, I heard the HEBCAC staff. “Where’s Big Chris?” they said. “He’ll know what to do; he’ll figure it out.” Even though I didn’t know who Big Chris was, I hoped he would show up. A few minutes later, a man entered and lumbered over to my mess of wires. He was about the size of an NFL linebacker. At six and half feet tall and nearly 300 pounds, he looked down at me and said, “Let’s see what we can do here.” Within a few minutes, he had two microphones ready to go. Big Chris had known what to do; he had figured it out.

What I didn’t know then, but what I know now is that Elroy Christopher always knows what to do and always figures it out. And for the past 22 years and counting, Elroy Christopher, or Big Chris as he is better known, has been “figuring it out” in East Baltimore.

Christopher is the director of the Covenant Community Association, co-director of the Rose Street Community Center, and vice president of HEBCAC’s board of directors. At any given time, you’ll find him tending to the community garden in the 900 block of Glover Street—a project Christopher began in 1996 and named the Garden of Eden—or looking after an inspiring bunch of 40 or so school children at an after-school and day care program located at HEBCAC’s Delegate Hattie Harrison Community Center led by their “All For One” group.

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Elroy Christopher is the director of the Covenant Community Association, co-director of the Rose Street Community Center, and vice president of HEBCAC's board of directors.

I visited Big Chris at the after-school program one afternoon. He described to me the range of talents in the room that afternoon and introduced me to an eight-year-old math whiz who could calculate the square of any integer within a few seconds (without a calculator or paper).

"All of these kids have the potential to be extraordinary," he said.

For the children and their parents, Big Chris' program is a welcomed solution to the undependable or even unsupervised care that many families would face as an alternative. Christopher said that most of the children were ineligible or unable to secure a spot in a school- or city-run program. For him, the program is simply a response to a community need. For the community, it is another example of Big Chris and his partners figuring it out.

But Big Chris hasn't always been able to spend his time improving his community through child care and gardening. In the mid-1990s, when the Madison East End neighborhood was overrun with drug traffic, Big Chris and his comrade, Clayton Guyton, set up camp on the corner of Ashland Avenue and Rose Street. Operating out of a home-made tent constructed of plastic tarp and duct tape, Christopher and Guyton became the community's 24-hour neighborhood watchmen.

"The issue wasn't to confront the drug dealers; the issue was to say, 'hey look, we're here to help' and to let them know this doesn't have to happen this way," said Christopher. "And that's when things began to change. Once the people in the neighborhood began to feel more comfortable and less trepidation, they began to have a more civil life again."

Each day he is met with a new challenge and does his best to find a solution. When Christopher saw that neighborhood youth needed a safe, positive environment during the out-of-school summer months, he put together a summer camp in a vacant lot. When Christopher meets ex-felons looking to rebuild their lives, he helps them find employment.

Big Chris says his neighborhood has come a long way since he first moved there 22 years ago, but that there is still immense work to be done. He is concerned for his aging neighbors who, like himself, have provided for others their whole life and are now struggling to make ends meet with no retirement. He is also saddened at the possibility that there may be no one to carry on their work for future generations.

Christopher and his wife have been married for 30 years with two daughters, two sons, and five grandchildren. He is a devoted member of Huber Memorial United Church where he is deeply inspired by his pastor, Reverend P.M. Smith, to continue his work in the community. In 2008, he received the Bank of America Neighborhood Excellence Initiative Award for his uncompromising efforts in East Baltimore.

Christopher says above all his mission is supporting and empowering the youth in his community. It seems to me that when Big Chris is faced with a challenge, he figures it out.

### Stay Tuned . . .

**UHI Self-Study and External Review:** The UHI has begun a process of both evaluation of our work over the past four years and a strategic planning process for the years ahead. As part of this process, **we would very much welcome your input about our work.** This summer, our evaluator Dr. Geri Peak will be developing a set of questions that will be circulated through a confidential questionnaire. More information about the questionnaire will be communicated through the UHI listserv. We plan to complete both the evaluation and forward plan by fall 2010.

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## NEWS AND UPDATES

### *Highlight on 2008 Small Grants Recipients: Augmenting the 2009 Census of Homeless—Baltimore's Homeless Youth*

In 2009, there was an estimated 781 homeless youth in Baltimore. Over half of these were definitely unaccompanied by a parent or guardian. The majority of youth were 15-18 years old, and just over 60% were male.

These figures were gathered through the Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Health (CAH) and the Baltimore Homeless Youth Initiative (BHYI) 2009 count of homeless youth, conducted in conjunction with the biennial Baltimore Homeless Census (led by Baltimore Homeless Services and Morgan State University's School of Architecture and Planning). The undertaking was only the second time such a count was carried out in Baltimore—the first was two years earlier. What's compelling about these data is how it compares to the Baltimore Homeless Census, which counted a total of 379 sheltered homeless youth, less than half the number captured by the CAH/BHYI "Parallel Count." Dr. Nan Astone, associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and CAH faculty lead of the Parallel Count, says the work suggests that the conventional approaches to counting homeless people lead to an undercount of homeless youth, even, when, as in Baltimore City, these counts are well carried out. This is because young people are often able to find a place to sleep at night—in the home of a friend or relative—and are not found in homeless shelters or out on the street, which are the major venues where homeless adults are counted.

In collaboration with Ross Pologe, chair of BHYI and executive director of Fellowship of Lights, a homeless youth advocacy organization in Baltimore, Astone and a small team of researchers and interns conducted the Parallel Count on January 22, 2009 at seven youth-serving organizations in Baltimore. They asked each organization to record the number of homeless youth served on the same day that the Census of Homeless was carried out in Baltimore. For Astone and Pologe, it was essential that each organization understand the definition of youth homelessness to ensure the most accurate count possible. In addition to the traditional view of homelessness which includes young people who are living on the street, in shelters and in transitional housing, the definition of homelessness for the Parallel Count was broad and included young people ages 10 – 24 who were in state foster care or juvenile justice custody, but have left the system without placement and "unstably-housed youth" who

are "doubled up," that is, staying temporarily with friends, extended kin networks, or lovers.



"We included unstably housed young people in the parallel count because they are likely to be in housing situations that are at best tenuous and unsustainable, and might be exploitative—such as situations that require the young person to exchange sex or illegal activities for shelter" says Astone. "These young people lack the skills to legitimately support

themselves and are not connected with an adult willing and able to make a long-term commitment to supporting and encouraging them to make a successful transition to adulthood."

In addition to the seven organizations that participated in the Parallel Count, Baltimore City Public Schools provided a list of homeless young people identified by the school system. Data was combined and filtered to remove duplicate records. The final count revealed that half of the young people were systems youth (in foster care or the juvenile justice system) and the overwhelming majority was unstably housed.

Despite the expanded reach of the Parallel Count in comparison to the annual Baltimore Homeless Census, Astone says there are still many challenges and limitations. For one, it is difficult for service providers to know whether or not a young person is unaccompanied. Additionally, the Parallel Count is a point-in-time, service-based enumeration and does not capture all of the young people who did not access services on the day of the count. Moving forward, Astone is exploring other options to count this highly vulnerable population of young people.

*For more information on the Parallel Count, contact Nan Astone at [nastone@jhsph.edu](mailto:nastone@jhsph.edu).*

## 2010 Small Grants Recipients

The UHI was pleased to announce the recipients of our 2010 Small Grants for Research and Program Development. Thirteen grants were awarded to partnerships between community groups or community leaders and faculty and staff across Johns Hopkins University in three categories: 1) undergraduate student-community research or program development, 2) graduate student-community research or program development, and 3) faculty-community research. The grants are intended to advance community-university collaborations and stimulate research and programming related to the health and well-being of the residents of Baltimore.

Visit the UHI website to learn more about each project/program.

### Undergraduate Student-Community Grants

#### *Sail-Ability Program at the Downtown Sailing Center*

Theresa Marshall, Carey Business School

Community partner: Peter Hegel, Downtown Sailing Center

Community partner: Ebony Vaughan, MENTOR Maryland

#### *Health Literacy Initiative Days*

Eruejerien Okoh, Peabody Institute

Community partner: Jeanette Seaman,  
Greater Homewood Corporation

#### *Unrealized Potential: Preparing East Baltimore Youth for Sustainable Careers in Science, Engineering and Medicine*

Aaron Chance, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences

Aubrey Jordan, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences

Community partner: Valencia Warnock,  
Carmelo Anthony Youth Development Center

### Graduate Student-Community Grants

#### *Volunteer Stress and Burnout in ExperienceCorps Baltimore*

Vijay Varma, Bloomberg School of Public Health

Community partner: Sylvia McGill, ExperienceCorps

#### *Acculturation and Migration as a Risk Factor for HIV Among Latinos in Baltimore*

Nadine Chen, School of Medicine

Community partner: Kathleen Page, Latino HIV Outreach Program, Baltimore City Health Department

#### *Recovering a Sense of Place: Environment and Community in Treatment (ReSPECT) for Addiction*

Joshua Garoon, Bloomberg School of Public Health

Community partner: Peter Bruun, Art on Purpose

#### *Transitioning to Independence: Assessing the ReEntry Environment for Young Adult Former Prisoners*

Eva Moore, School of Medicine

Community partner: Reverend Horace Smith,  
Group Ministries, Inc.

#### *Characterizing the Need for Mental Health Services in Baltimore Youth*

Brad Sutton, School of Medicine

Community partner: Susan Tibbels, New Song Academy

#### *Improving HIV Preventive Services in Baltimore through Geospatial Analyses*

Adam Milam, Bloomberg School of Public Health

Community partner: Reverend Debra Hickman,  
Sister's Together and Reaching (STAR)

### Faculty-Community Grants

#### *Neighborhood Characteristics and Stress During Pregnancy: A Community Perspective in Baltimore*

Cynthia Minkovitz, professor,  
Bloomberg School of Public Health

Community partner: Maxine Reed Vance,  
Baltimore City Health Start

#### *Finding Our Wings Community Documentary Program*

Jacquelyn Duval-Harvey, instructor,  
Bloomberg School of Public Health

Community partner: Kirsten D'Andrea Hollander,  
Finding Our Wings

#### *Passport to Health: Taking Charge of your Health; Empowering Intimate Partner Violence Survivors to Become their own Health Advocates*

Patty Wilson, instructor, School of Nursing

Community partner: Janice Miller, House of Ruth Maryland

#### *Birth Companions Services for New Refugees: Partnering with the International Rescue Committee*

Elizabeth T. Jordan, assistant professor, School of Nursing

Community partner: Erica DeViscio,  
Organization International Rescue Committee

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# HIGHLIGHTS FROM RECENT EVENTS

## *'Immortal Life' Author Visits East Baltimore*

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David "Sonny" Lacks, Henrietta Lacks' son, describes how the legacy of HeLa has affected his family's life.

cells and the story of Henrietta Lacks. She spent the next decade immersed in the lives of the Lacks family—especially Henrietta's children—who were still very confused about what had actually happened to their mother and her cells.

"It was standard practice in the 1950s to take tissues from a person without

consent," Skloot said in an interview with the Baltimore Examiner. "The HeLa story also raises complicated questions about who should have the right to profit off of research done on human tissues, and what sort of disclosure should be required when tissue research is done for profit."

In *The Immortal Life*, Skloot's intention is not only to tell the story of the woman behind HeLa cells but also to encourage discussion around ethical practices for research on human tissue and the value and importance of using human tissue samples in medical research.

The book talk and discussion on February 22 was especially significant, not only because St. Frances Academy is just miles from Johns Hopkins Hospital, but because members of the

Lacks family were there to share their own stories and offer their own perspectives. The event was presented by the UHI in collaboration with the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics and St. Frances Academy Community Center.

To learn more about *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot visit <http://rebeccaskloot.com/>.

Members of the Lacks family listen in as Rebecca Skloot responds to audience questions.



Photos courtesy of Scott Donovan

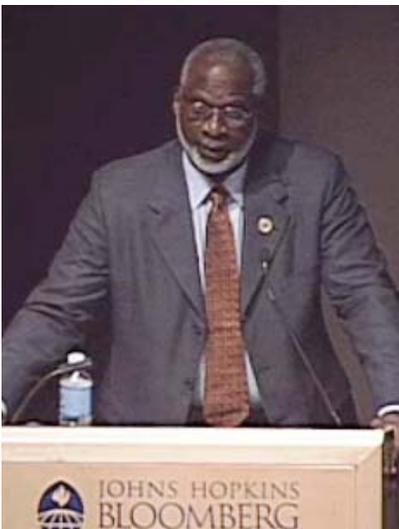
**Missed a UHI event?** Visit our website to view full-length videos of UHI symposia, read past issues of the newsletter, download UHI publications, sign-up for our listserv, and read more about our work.

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM RECENT EVENTS

## *Addressing and Overcoming Health Disparities: The Challenge in Urban America*

By Michelle Taylor

Former Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher issued a challenge to all those present at the UHI's quarterly symposium on January 27, 2010. He declared that leaders were needed to transform the health and wellness of our communities and invited everyone to join the "relay race" to tackle the public health issues of our time. As the director of the Satcher Health Leadership Institute at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, he has committed himself to the reduction and eventual elimination of health disparities in this country and around the world, and he brought his message to the Baltimore community.



Dr. Satcher outlined several focus areas to begin the work of eliminating disparities in health, including access to care, improvement in the quality of care, lifestyle enhancement, improvement of environmental quality, and a balanced research agenda. He reminded the Johns Hopkins family that "culture counts" and asked everyone to take

a "CRASH" course in making a difference by considering the following tenets: Consider culture, Respect, Assess and Affirm, Sensitivity and Self-awareness, and Humility.

His message is timely given some of Baltimore's disparity statistics:

- The life expectancy at birth for an African American baby born between 2006 and 2008 was 70.2 years, compared to 76.2 years for a white baby born during the same time period.
- In 2006, there were 175 new HIV cases per 100,000 people among African Americans, compared to 23.2 new cases per 100,000 people, nationally.
- African Americans were twice as likely to die from diabetes-related causes as whites (44.5 vs. 23.8 per 100,000 people, respectively).

After a full day meeting with university officials, Baltimore community members, and students, Dr. Satcher's visit culminated in a rallying cry to strive for health equity through eliminating "inequities at a social level" and working toward a balanced community approach that includes health promotion, disease prevention, early detection, and moves toward universal health care.

A panel discussion following Dr. Satcher's presentation featuring panelists Diane Bell McCoy, president and CEO of Associated Black Charities, Francis "Toni" Draper, pastor of Freedom Temple AME Zion Church, and Dean Michael Klag, dean of the Bloomberg School of Public Health, continued the conversation and echoed Dr. Satcher's sentiments. Mrs. McCoy spoke on "health disparities and wealth disparities" and encouraged an "economic conversation" stressing the importance of economic development in communities as a means to address health disparities. Pastor Draper described the need for a "sense of urgency" and uplifted community collaborations that are working in East Baltimore. Finally, Dean Klag expressed that "health care is a right, not a privilege" and urged students, community members, and the Hopkins family to strive toward this principle.

*Visit the UHI website to view the symposium in its entirety.*



Diane Bell McCoy, president and CEO of Associated Black Charities, responds to Dr. Satcher's talk, stressing the importance of economic development in communities as a means to address health disparities.



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