

## Walking With Purpose

NNEKA ONWUMERE '24 CREATED A MOTHER'S DAY GIFT SHE HOPES WILL KEEP GIVING.

**O**n Mother's Day, a group of walkers traversed through downtown Syracuse to raise money for brain cancer research. Participants in the inaugural Upstate Brain Cancer Research Walk, which began on the Syracuse University campus and ended at the Upstate Cancer Center, were mostly family members of those impacted by brain cancer, among the deadliest of cancers, particularly for children.

For organizer Nneka Onwumere '24, the effort was personal. An aspiring neurosurgeon, she is interested in all matters of research related to the brain, a fascination sparked as an adolescent when she would shadow her mother at work in her role as a medical assistant in the neurology department at the VA Medical Center in the Bronx.

During junior high and high school, Onwumere volunteered there and enjoyed chatting with the patients in her spare time. "My mother had me when she was in her 40s. My cousins were 20 years older than me and my brother 16 years older. I grew up spending time with older people and was comfortable talking with them," she says.

It was a quality that didn't go unnoticed. "You're easy to talk to," an older patient once told her. "You should think about becoming a doctor."

Onwumere lost her mother, Elsweta Gordon, last fall, after a series of ischemic strokes. Organizing the walk was a way to honor the inspiration her mom had provided while keeping herself busy on her first Mother's Day without her. It was also a way to give back to Upstate and the local community. "I always want to make a mark wherever I am," she says. "If I set my mind on something I want to do, I find a way to make it happen."

That includes attending medical school.



Medical student Nneka Onwumere launched Upstate's inaugural Brain Cancer Research Walk.

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—Nneka Onwumere '24

Onwumere attended Manhattanville College and majored in chemistry. "The process was difficult," she recalls. "I started to doubt that medical school was a possibility for me." Nonetheless, she applied after graduation but was unsuccessful. Eventually, she began working at Sloan Kettering Cancer Center as a personal office assistant for David Ilson, MD, PhD, a medical oncologist specializing in gastrointestinal cancers. Over time, she'd also earned a master's in chemistry from the City University of New York. After three years, Dr. Ilson made her a research assistant on a clinical trial for patients with Stage IV GI tumors. "The trial was essentially a last resort treatment," says Onwumere. "My role was to explain the clinical trial to them and get their consent to participate."

With Dr. Ilson's encouragement, Onwumere began studying and took the MCAT again. It was a stressful period, working full time in the clinic at Sloan Kettering and helping care for her mother, who was in failing health. "I wasn't even sure I could get my application completed or if I should just give up on my dream," she recalls. "I think I submitted it at 11 p.m. on the last night it was due."

At the suggestion of the Office of Admissions, Onwumere applied to Upstate's Medical Scholars Master's program, which provides students extra enrichment and a pathway to medical school. She earned her master's in medical technology and started medical school in 2020.

She hasn't looked back. Although she's enjoyed learning about all of the different body systems, nothing has eclipsed her interest in the brain. Onwumere served as president of Upstate's chapter of Colleges Against Cancer, is currently co-president of the Upstate chapter of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS), and has shadowed neurosurgeons Grahame Gould, MD, a cerebral vascular surgeon, and Lawrence Chin, MD, a neuro-oncologist and dean of the College of Medicine. "I really enjoy being in the OR. I've watched a brain tumor be removed by the residents as well as a surgery on a young adult with a vestibular schwannoma pressing on cranial nerve number eight that impacted his walking," she says. "It's a powerful experience."



A family participating in the walk



Onwumere with members of Debbie Gregg's family

It was participating in both Upstate's Making Strides against Breast Cancer Walk and the CNY Walk to End Alzheimer's Disease that got Onwumere looking into whether there was a similar effort to support brain cancer research that her club could participate in. The closest thing she found was held in New York City's Central Park, so she thought, "why not do it ourselves," she recalls.

"I had no idea how much work goes into organizing a walk, even a small one."

In March, Onwumere was successful at recruiting Upstate clubs Colleges Against Cancer, Wishmakers on Campus, and Medicine in Motion to collaborate with AANS and began working with the Upstate Foundation to learn how to handle money raised from the event. While doing research, she stumbled upon Debbie's Brain Cancer Research Fund, which was established by Debbie Gregg, a local woman who had been

diagnosed with, and eventually died from, a rare aggressive brain tumor, to support brain cancer research at Upstate. Terry Shenfeld at the Upstate Foundation reached out to Debbie's family, and it was determined that proceeds from the walk would be directed to that fund.

Onwumere handled most of the logistics of organizing the walk—while juggling classes and studying for Step 1—including working with Syracuse Police and the Department of Parks and Recreation to get the route approved, designing T-shirts, and marketing the event, which raised more than \$3,000. She hopes its just the start.

"My dream is that even after I graduate, this will be an annual walk that will continue to raise money for brain cancer research that will lead to effective treatments," she says. "I just hope that I can make Upstate proud for believing in me."