

## DONNA-ANN THOMAS, MD '99

## A Dream Achieved

Donna-Ann Thomas, MD '99, knows she's a role model. "To be able to tell a kid that looks like me that if I was able to go to medical school, they can too; to instill hope and the desire to strive toward something, that's what makes me successful, not money or a title," she says.

But Dr. Thomas has the titles to back her up: she's associate professor of anesthesiology, division chief of pain medicine and regional anesthesiology, and vice chair of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Department of Anesthesiology at the Yale School of Medicine.

It's a long way from her upbringing in Jamaica. Although Thomas was interested in the idea of medicine and helping people, it didn't seem a likely path. There were no science teachers at her school. Her grandfather was a pastor, and having attended many funerals, she was terrified of dead bodies. And her father expected her to stay in Jamaica.

Undeterred, Thomas came to the United States after high school, following her mother who had migrated to Queens, New York, to work as a nanny. Thomas worked full-time to help her family and attended college part-time at night. After a serious fall took her out of work, she was able to enroll in school full time, excelling in her science courses. Her professors urged her to consider medical school. Believing she couldn't handle working with a cadaver, she enrolled in a master's program in biochemistry instead.

Nonetheless, the desire to help people persisted. After a friend was admitted to medical school, Thomas asked if she could get permission to visit the anatomy lab. "I really expected I would pass out," she recalls. Instead, the lab visit made her realize she'd been scared all those years for nothing. "I literally did a touchdown dance and said, 'I'm going to medical school.'"

Thomas landed at Upstate, where, inspired by Patricia Numann, MD '65, she decided to pursue surgery. She went to Graduate Hospital in Philadelphia for surgical residency but hit a roadblock in her third year when she couldn't pass the Step 2 exam. "It really had more to do with my personal life at the time and the fact that I didn't see myself doing surgery," say Thomas.

Not letting a failure define her, Thomas reached out to the Upstate Department of Anesthesiology. Robustly endorsed by Dr. Numann, Thomas joined the Upstate anesthesiology residency program, ultimately becoming chief resident. (And to prove to herself she could do it, she enrolled in a study program and passed both Step 2 and Step 3 in surgery before beginning anesthesiology residency.)

Because of her surgical experience, Thomas was frequently asked to assist in the operating room during closures for pain procedures, leading her to pursue a fellowship in pain medicine at Upstate. "I went into medicine to help people who are suffering and managing pain is a big part of that," she says. "Pain management combined the procedural aspect of anesthesiology, which I liked, with continuity of care and patient relationships, giving me the best of both worlds," she says.

After completing her fellowship, Thomas joined the Upstate Department of Anesthesiology, where she became the inaugural Director of Acute Pain. "We built a program to coordinate care, policy, and protocols for management of patients in acute pain," she says. "Protocols regarding the use of regional anesthesia and nerve blocks for perioperative pain, for patients in sickle cell crisis, to help manage the patient's pain around surgery and interventions for trauma patients coming in."

In 2013, Thomas was recruited to Yale School of Medicine. During her tenure, she has served as program director for both the pain fellowship and acute pain regional fellowship, but currently is focused on patient care and her vice chair of DEI role. "We want to make sure our residency class is fully diverse, our faculty is fully diverse and that we provide the resources needed for everyone to get to the same level," she says. "We're also working on programs to address needs outside the academic portion, such as mentoring, lectures and workshops."

A woman of deep faith, Thomas spends nearly all her free time volunteering with her church or on medical missions that have taken her to Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mozambique, Honduras, Guyana, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Jamaica. "It's been one of the great joys of my life," she says.

—Renée Gearhart Levy

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**Donna-Ann Thomas, MD '99, leads pain management and DEI efforts in the Department of Anesthesiology at the Yale School of Medicine.**