

What Black History Month Means to Me: Kola Jegede, MD



Dr. Kola Jegede, a spine surgeon at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn, was drawn to surgery after witnessing how a hip replacement restored a family member's mobility and eliminated the painful effects of arthritis. "I found it amazing that within a matter of weeks, a doctor could change someone's quality of life," says Dr. Jegede.

Dr. Kola Jegede, a spine surgeon at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn, reflects on his career path and those who have inspired him along the way.

Know your values. My parents immigrated from Nigeria before I was born. My mother was a social worker who went back to school to become a nurse, and my dad was a pharmacist. Every day I think about his work ethic and the lessons he taught me: Be consistent; do what you need to do, even on days you don't want to; remain grounded in your goals; stay on the path. I live my life by these tenets. And I'm motivated every day by my mother's optimism, spirituality, and faith.

Never underestimate your power to help others. I was in my late teens when a family member developed sickle cell anemia, which resulted in debilitating hip arthritis at a young age. Eventually she had a total hip replacement, recovered most of her mobility, and was pain-free. I found it amazing that within a matter of weeks, a doctor could change someone's quality of life. It truly sparked my interest in medicine.

Seize every opportunity to learn. In college, I was president of the Charles Drew Minority Association of Pre-Medical Students and a member of the historically black fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha. These roles taught me critical lessons in leadership as well as how to work with others, run a budget, and build a team.

Be flexible, but stick to the plan. During medical school at Yale, I took a year off to do spine research as a Doris Duke Charitable Foundation International Clinical Research Fellow. That decision made my path a little longer, but it also helped me get to where I am now. Allow for detours but never lose sight of the big goal.

Stay ahead of the curve. The innovations within spine and orthopedic surgery have boomed in recent years. Five years ago, fusion surgery was often an open procedure. Now, nearly all the fusion procedures I do are minimally invasive and robot-assisted, a technique that enables patients to recover faster. My field demands that you stay ahead of the curve and keep adapting to the newest technologies. The learning never stops.

Acknowledge those who forged a path. During Black History Month, I make a point of talking to my two children about leaders who have inspired me and helped advance the cause. Martin Luther King Jr. was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha and one of the driving forces in my decision to join the same fraternity. In the 1950's, Marcus Garvey introduced Americans to the idea of Pan-Africanism, the idea that people of African descent have common interests and should be unified. That led right into the civil rights movement. A. Philip Randolph, who led the first successful Black-led labor union, was a champion of education. And, of course, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball right here in Brooklyn. Each of them helped pave the way, and they deserve to be celebrated.