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Akeela Benson
San Diego Black Nurses Association

For Akeela Benson, MSN, APRN, FNP-C, dreams really do come true.

“I had a bike accident when I was 12, and they said I had a 12 percent chance to live. I was in the hospital for 13 days. My nurses literally changed my life,” said Benson who currently serves as a clinical research practitioner and is a task force member with the San Diego Black Nurses Association.

“I have been a registered nurse since 2010,” she said. “I’ve wanted to be a nurse practitioner since I was 15. I have been a family nurse practitioner since 2014.”

Since receiving her BSN degree from Bowling Green State University in 2010, and a master’s of science degree in nursing from Governor’s State University, Benson has also discovered a passion for serving her community.

“I get excited about being able to serve the community. When you’re doing something that you love, things you do outside your work align. You give yourself to what you’re passionate about,” she said, adding, “I don’t have a lot of free time. It doesn’t include much of a social life. My social life is community service, which I get to do alongside others who are just as committed. In undergrad, my commitment to service kicked in. It was never to this extent.”

“My new norm is serving others. My commitment to my community has become another part of me. There are three of me: nurse practitioner, mom, and community servant,” said Benson, who is a proud mom to 4-year-old Kadence Lyric, a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, and does volunteer work with various organizations, including California Association of Nurse Practitioners.

Despite her busy schedule, Benson also makes it a point to find time for self-care.
“I love yoga, so when I want balance, I find a place on my yoga mat, preferably under the sun or stars on a beautiful California day. I write poetry in my spare time to reflect on life's circumstances, serving as another outlet to balance personal and professional life. Last but definitely not least, I release to music of any kind, depending on my mood. This provides daily balance in all situations. Occasionally, I will hike through the mountains, jog or watch the sunset at the beach when time allows. These activities occur less frequently but provide balance nonetheless.”

Her balance also includes spending time with friends and colleagues outside of work. For Benson, one of the bright sides to the pandemic has been the opportunity for at least one life-changing celebration.

“I hosted a birthday gathering for one of our coworkers on my rooftop, and about an hour into the event, we received notification that the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine—the clinical trial that we were working on—had received emergency use authorization. To be together as a team during receipt of this news was amazing.”

Despite what many see as a rush to market, Benson has been hard at work on the clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccine for more than two years, and she was also at the forefront to assist with testing at a local express care facility where patients could be tested for the virus for COVID.

“The best parts of working during the pandemic have been the opportunity to provide hope by means of direct vaccination, provide education to influence the decision to be vaccinated for members of our underserved communities as a trusted messenger, and to be a firsthand witness to the evolution of science as a clinical research nurse practitioner working on the Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine trials,” said Benson who also works with HIV trials. “Everything you see on the news, we’re a part of.

“We were able to see people get vaccinated. To actually see the efficacy of the vaccine through my job and volunteer efforts, witnessing less hospitalization and death within our community has been super rewarding,” she said.

Thanks to her volunteer work with the San Diego Black Nurses Association, Benson helped vaccinate more than 60 percent of the elderly population— one of COVID’s most vulnerable groups— which according to many studies were more likely to die first as a result of COVID and its complications. She has also assisted with spreading the word about the importance of being vaccinated.
“Serving the community in the capacity of vaccine promotion door to door has given me an appreciation for grass rooting in politics. It is comparable because I know what I am promoting will save more lives than it will cause harm. This is difficult because you have to provide the space for members of your community to be expressive and voice their concerns at the same time, you may be trying to prevent vaccine waste. This has been the hardest part for me—although with a great scheduling team this isn’t something I often encounter. With the presentations I give related to COVID-19 vaccines, addressing vaccine hesitancy is easier in that questions are anticipated rather than posed as road blocks to the presenter.”

Being able to have an up-close-and-personal look at the COVID-19 virus and its effects has also made Benson see her family, which includes her mom and best friend, Dawn Smith, MBA, from a different perspective.

“It’s made me more appreciative and grateful. A lot of my friends have parents who have died. It made me more grateful for my mother who is my best friend. I have to be grateful I’ve been able to get up and help other people. It has taken my gratitude to a new level,” she said.

It has also made her realize that even caregivers need help.

“It’s hard for me to ask for help,” she admits. “I pray every day that I’ll be okay with leaning on others. Yoga helps me to release any tension. The only time I asked for help for [Kadence] was to help other people.”

Despite her realization, Benson makes it a point not to dwell on the past and to be the change she wants to see in the world.

“This year has taught me life is perception. [The pandemic] has brought so many positive things. Think about all the people you know who have become entrepreneurs. If we only look at the negative, we end up in a negative place.

‘Being the change I want to see in the world’ is the motto that I live by, and it makes it easy to care and love everyone around me. I have wanted to be a nurse practitioner since I was 15 years of age, and almost 20 years later that passion remains unchanged and has never faltered, so the pandemic did not damage the spirit of nursing for me at all.”