



New Frontiers Against AIDS

With stakeholders in Ghana, LaRon Nelson '02N, '09N (PhD) leads an innovative approach to HIV/AIDS prevention.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

IN THE LAST 30 YEARS, PROGRESS IN THE treatment of HIV/AIDS has been remarkable by any measure. Due to the development primarily of antiretroviral treatments, which slow the reproduction of the HIV virus within the body, it's now possible to talk about "living with AIDS."

Technologies aimed at prevention have advanced as well. Among the most recent developments is an antiretroviral drug that, taken daily by people at high risk for exposure to HIV, can diminish their chances of becoming infected.

Yet progress in prevention has been uneven, with great progress in some

populations, and the continuing spread of the disease in others.

For public health professionals such as **LaRon Nelson** '02N, '09N (PhD), these disparities underscore a persistent dilemma: "There's already a pill," Nelson says. "The challenge is, how do you get people to go to a clinic and take it?"

He's addressing that challenge in an area where it's especially steep: Ghana, a West African nation with sizeable numbers of AIDS cases, high transmission rates, and a traditional culture in which homosexual activity is strongly condemned.

The project, which Nelson has been working on since 2009, is entitled KAPPA, or Kumasi & Accra Project to Prevent AIDS.

It received a major boost in 2011, when Nelson, then an assistant professor of nursing at the University of Toronto, was named one of 19 "Rising Stars in Global Health" from across Canada. The honor, designed to support bold approaches to address some of the most difficult challenges in global public health, came with \$100,000 of funding from the Canadian government as well as high profile publicity and endorsement of the project.

Nelson says he based the project on self-determination theory, which he was first exposed to at Rochester. A theory of human motivation developed by Rochester

▲ **NURSING INNOVATOR:** The Canadian government declared Nelson a "rising star" as part of an initiative to fund "big ideas with big impact" on the most difficult global public health challenges.

psychology professors Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, it posits that people change their behavior most meaningfully and sustainably when they're responding to internal rewards they define for themselves, rather than external rewards, defined and granted by others. Nelson learned about the theory from Geoffrey Williams '93 (PhD), a professor of psychology, psychiatry, and medicine at the Medical Center who's applied it in designing interventions to support people who want to quit smoking, and who is a partner on the KAPPA project.

Today there are 16 Ghanaian physicians on the project working to provide preventive services to men in the cities of Accra and Kumasi who are at highest risk for contracting HIV. At highest risk are men who have sex with other men, or MSM, as clinicians refer to them. The designation makes an important point, says Nelson, noting that previous research teams encountered barriers when they attempted to identify MSM as "gay men."

"In America, we tend to start off with these labels," he says. "We categorize things and people. We call men who have sex with men 'gay.'"

But men in Ghana were rejecting that label. Many carried on primary relationships with women. They didn't cluster in particular neighborhoods or seek to define themselves by sexual categories. "Many researchers who came before us made those categories a prerequisite," says Nelson. "And then they said, 'Well, if you can't get people to admit they're gay, then what can you do?'"

Identifying MSM in Ghana is not easy. But it's critical, because Ghanaian men are unlikely to approach health clinics on their own to receive AIDS prevention services. The clinics, says Nelson, are often seen as "hostile environments" to Ghanaian MSM. "They're afraid," says Nelson. "Afraid of getting a lecture and afraid of getting turned in."

Nelson describes KAPPA as a structural intervention, a term used to describe projects that seek to improve the health of entire communities by seeking change in social environments. He's developed ways to reach high-risk men through their own networks, and worked with their nurses and physicians to develop new protocols for the delivery of health services.

Thomas Agyarko-Poku, a Ghanaian physician with Ghana Health Services and local principal investigator on the project, says KAPPA has scored a major coup: it's gained

the support of one of Ghana's most influential leaders, King Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, the monarch of Ghana's largest ethnic group, the Ashanti.

"KAPPA is truly a breakthrough, since it's the first time a foreign study team has collaborated with the Kingdom of Ashanti to conduct a study on MSM," Poku says. The involvement of King Tutu II made it "easier to recruit MSM, because their fear of persecution was reduced."


After his 2011 award from the Canadian government, Nelson has continued to rack up honors for his work. In 2012, after accepting a position as assistant dean for global and community affairs at the University of South Florida College of Nursing, he was one of 12 recipients of the Impact HIV/AIDS Champion of Change award presented at the International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C. **Orlando Harris '10N** (MS), a doctoral candidate at the School of Nursing and a former classmate of Nelson's, was also among the winners.

Dianne Morrison-Beedy '93N (PhD), who mentored Nelson at Rochester, recruited him last year to the University of South Florida, where she's dean of the College of Nursing. "He's a phenomenal young scientist," she says.

As a National Institute of Nursing Research predoctoral fellow, Nelson honed his specialty, which he describes as the health of African and African-descendant communities, the latter often at the social and economic margins of the societies in which they live. As a doctoral candidate, and as associate director of the Monroe County Department of Public Health, Nelson worked to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in the Rochester area.

Nelson credits the philosophy of nursing care he encountered at the School of Nursing as a guide in his research. It involves delivering care in ways compatible with the values and experiences of patients and their social networks.

"Health promotion at the community level is really about understanding that individuals don't exist in isolation," he says. "If we can move communities in terms of a shift in attitudes, or in terms of a shift in health status, then I think we'll have a more lasting impact than we do with individual level care alone."

If it sounds more complicated than treating each patient as an individual, it's because it is. As Nelson often says: "Human lives aren't simple. So the answers to problems are not going to be either." 

Is There an Alumnus App for That?

It's a book ... It's a recording ... No, it's an app! Short for "application software," the small programs designed for smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices are multimedia creations. A combination of text, visual elements, and often, sound, they're the creations of a new type of author.



OUR JOURNEY IN THE HOSPITAL

Fran Panzella London '86N, '91N (MS), a health care education specialist at Phoenix Children's Hospital in Arizona, designed the app to help parents with children in the hospital communicate with their health care team and identify what they need to know before taking their child home. *For iPad, iPhone, and Android phone.*



THOUGHTCLOUD

Novall Khan '09, a researcher at Harvard's Schacter Memory Lab, has developed the stress-reduction app based on the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness meditation. The app aids users in the observation and awareness of negative thoughts and in letting negative thoughts go. *For iPhone.*

Forging an Ethical Path

As its first general counsel, Stacie Pittell '84 is helping shape a new District of Columbia ethics board.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

FOR YEARS, STACIE PITTELL '84 HAS CARVED a path in secure and well-established roles in public investigations. After graduating from Rochester as a double major in philosophy and English, and earning a JD at American University, she began her legal career as a prosecutor in the King's County District Attorney's office in Brooklyn, N.Y. She spent 15 years at the New York City Department of Investigation, and in 2008, moved to Washington, D.C., to become the assistant inspector general for investigations.

This past fall, she dove into something new—in essence, a public sector start-up—when she accepted the position of general counsel for the brand new District of Columbia Board of Ethics and Government Accountability.

"I was both intrigued and excited by the idea of starting up a new agency," she says of her move. "The board serves an important function—to restore the public's confidence in the integrity of our local government—and I wanted to be part of making that happen."

The three-member ethics board comes after a spate of highly publicized investigations and improprieties. A campaign aide to the mayor, as well as two city council members, have been tied to separate incidents in the past couple of years. Pittell, refraining from comment on any particulars, says "misconduct is the exception, rather than the rule" and that government needs to be more accountable to citizens and more transparent.

The District has long faced unique hurdles in prosecuting crimes in local government. As the nation's capitol, it's owned by the federal government. In 1973, Congress granted the city limited autonomy under the Home Rule Act.

But the law included several restrictions on the ability of local officials to prosecute crime. The city has no elected district attorney, for example, to prosecute serious offenses. Only the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia can do that.

For years, some activists have criticized the office—the only U.S. attorney's office



FOLLOW THE MONEY? Misconduct "usually comes down to money," says Pittell, adding that it can have a big impact on what's left for vital city services.

responsible for prosecuting local and well as federal offenses—for failing to prosecute many offenses local officials have referred there.

According to Mike DeBonis, who covers

District politics for the *Washington Post*, the new board won't address complaints about the U.S. attorney's office entirely—full prosecutorial authority remains in that office and it requires a higher standard of

evidence than the board—but the board will be able to extract stiff administrative penalties and fines. He adds that among the most important aspects of the board is that it has “a dedicated staff to investigate ethics complaints.”

Leading that staff of investigators is Pittell.

“I’m not only new, I’m the first general counsel,” she says, underscoring just how much is yet to be determined. A few things are certain, however, and one is that Pittell will act as both an investigator and a prosecutor. She’ll oversee investigations of misconduct allegations, and in cases where the evidence warrants it, bring cases into open adversarial hearings before the board.


“When we got Stacie, it was our greatest coup,” says Darrin Sobin, the former D.C. assistant attorney general who’s now the board’s first executive director. “She brought many years of investigative experience, and it really says something about her character that she was willing to take a chance on a start-up organization, to do something she felt was important to the people of the District.”

The board also provides ethics advice and training, meaning that Pittell, as general counsel, will perform those roles as well. They’re new to her, but they’re ones she’s glad to take on. “I’ve never been in that kind of position before, where you see people at the front end,” she says. “They want to do the right thing. And they’d rather not do it than do the wrong thing.”

Pittell estimates that as of this spring, the board gets about two requests for advice on any given day. “As we get our name out there,” she says, “it’s picking up.”

The board publishes all its formal opinions on its website. Pittell believes the board’s open operations will encourage public confidence. She notes that the board’s monthly public meetings, have been well attended so far. “People come and participate,” she says. “We post a written agenda beforehand, we have issues that we put out, and people have an opportunity to come and speak. We’ve gotten good ideas from people.”

The stakes for the board’s success are high. In D.C.—a city that can’t pass its budget without the approval of Congress—political corruption always brings with it the risk of more federal intervention.

Pittell puts it starkly. “You don’t want to have problem after problem and scandal after scandal and have the federal government look at you and say, ‘You can’t run your own city.’” 

In the News

JO ANNE PEDRO-CARROLL ’84 (PHD) LENDS HELPING HAND ON SESAME STREET

Sesame Street’s Abby Cadabby got some solid advice on coping with her parents’ divorce from clinical psychologist **Jo Anne Pedro-Carroll** ’84 (PhD). Now she’s sharing that advice with her young fans.

An expert on children and divorce, Pedro-Carroll was hired as a consultant to Sesame Workshop, the digital educational initiative affiliated with the classic PBS children’s television show *Sesame Street*. Pedro-Carroll was among four experts who shaped the multimedia project “Little Children, Big Challenges: Divorce.” The project, designed for children ages two to eight, includes resources for parents, such as a guide and online toolkit, as well as for children.

In a DVD and a storybook, the muppet Abby Cadabby—who’s lived alongside Big Bird and friends on *Sesame Street* since 2006—shares with her young fans her feelings and experiences before, during, and after her parents’ divorce.

Pedro-Carroll is the author of the 2010 book *Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies for Helping Children Thrive Through Divorce* (Penguin).



HOW SHE GOT TO SESAME STREET: Pedro-Carroll, an expert on children and divorce, wrote an award-winning book that captured the attention of the nonprofit Sesame Workshop.

NORMAN NEUREITER ’52 HONORED BY AUSTRIAN GOVERNMENT

Norman Neureiter ’52 has been awarded the Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art. The award, bestowed by the Austrian government, recognized Neureiter for his work with the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, founded in 1972 to bring scientists across the Cold War divide together to address global problems. The institute, which today includes member nations from five continents, is located near Vienna.

Neureiter, a chemist and the acting director of the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s Center for Science, Technology, and Security Policy, was honored by the Japanese government in 2011. He received the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star decoration, in recognition of his work promoting cooperation between the United States and Japan in science.

AT CARNEGIE HALL, AN EASTMAN COLLABORATION

Carnegie Hall was the stage for an Eastman artistic reunion this spring. In April, classical guitarist **Peter Fletcher** ’95E (MM) performed *Diary of a Camino*, by **Jeremy Gill** ’96E, as part of a concert honoring the 120th anniversary of the birth of composer Federico Mompou. Gill wrote the piece for Fletcher, who recorded *Federico Mompou: Guitar Works* (Centaur) in 2002. *Diary of a Camino* was inspired by a walk Gill took along the Camino Francés—an ancient pilgrimage route to the Galician city of Santiago de Compostela, where Mompou lectured.

In program notes, which Fletcher posted on his blog at www.peterfletcher.com/blog, Gill writes: “Beginning in Samos, at its imposing medieval monastery, I walked the Camino to Santiago de Compostela, each day keeping a sonic diary of the trip. Besides the morning bells at the monastery of Samos (O mosteiro de Samos), which symbolically began my journey (and begins this work), my ‘entries’ included notations of birds (paxaros), evening bells (campás no serán), a hypnotically asymmetrical ticking clock (reloxo), and musical depictions of fog and wind (brétema e vento), double rainbows (arcos da vella), and a solitary willow (un salgueiro solitario) . . . I assembled the work from these sketches.”