

Health Equity Column: Lifting Up Black Maternal Health Week

Jenné Johns, MPH, Jaye Wilson, LPN



April marks two federally recognized priorities in the United States: National Minority Health Month and Black Maternal Health Week. As we move as a nation to solve some of the most pressing and challenging inequities faced by Black, Brown, and Minoritized communities, we are reminded this month that we must continue to lift up solutions led and created by those populations most impacted by these disparities. We must also acknowledge

the continued growing disparities in Black maternal mortality rates and the widening disparities in the rates of premature births in one of the wealthiest and most technologically savvy nations around the globe. While the White House released its second Annual Proclamation in support of Black Maternal Health Week, we need more...more advocates, more funding, and more solutions that we know work to keep Black Moms, Babies, and Preemie babies alive, healthy, and thriving.

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In this month’s Health Equity Column, I have interviewed Jaye Wilson, LPN, Founder, President, and CEO of Melinated Moms, a powerful advocacy organization for women of the melinated spectrum. Jaye offers her personal and professional experiences leading local and national advocacy solutions to support, empower, and activate Black and Brown women with lived experiences during their birthing journey. As you read this column, I encourage you to reflect on how your institution is partnering with or supporting Black women-led and Black women serving organizations to save Black Moms, Black Babies, and Black Preemie, Babies.

What is your definition of health equity?

My definition of health equity is providing the right tools that are necessary for a person to thrive in the most healthy way. So that’s looking at their health from different angles, such as physical health, by making sure they have medical providers or clinician that is following any diagnosis or any health-related ailment. With mental health, you know, making sure that they’re mindful and they have someone that is connected to them and helping them to balance their emotional health. There’s spiritual, so just keeping them grounded and whatever that means for them, you know, so it’s not specifically religious base, but you know having a connection with a higher power that gives people

purpose. There’s environmental, you know, looking around them to make sure that they’re in a safe environment, and they’re able to thrive. All of these different angles really uplift why health equity is important because what I may need to be holistically healthy may be much different and look different than what your needs are. Creating an equitable space to meet your needs and meet my needs, that’s the ultimate goal

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What are your organizational priorities for addressing health and racial equity in perinatal and neonatal care?

Melinated Moms is a community center, women empowerment organization, and we primarily represent moms and women across the melinated spectrum because a large group of our members, our moms, more than 90%, understand how pivotal it is to have representation for moms and their different birthing experiences. For me, I’m a four-time survivor of preeclampsia, and 2 of my children passed away before they were able to come to term due to my preeclampsia. So I understand that avenue of needing to share that with someone, needing to have resources around how to navigate what that journey looked like, you know, going through loss. But then also going through subsequent pregnancies that were successful, but still just as hard. So you know, we created this platform so that moms can see themselves and other people. Seeing how much, Once Upon A Preemie Academy has really bridged the gaps on what it looks like for black maternal health and representation and health equity, we want to be a part of that. So I felt like this was the best partnership ever. I’ve been so so excited to work with her for so many years. I feel like we’re aligned in that way, and we’re doing a lot of the same work. I’m really good at engaging the community and finding women who have these unique but common commonalities. I’m also really good at helping them to bring those things out without feeling judged or filling alone. When we’re going through these issues that impact our journey into motherhood, it often feels like an isolating moment. But when you find like-minded people who are willing to talk, willing to share resources, and also willing to uplift you while you’re go-

ing through it, that's the best thing.

What personal and professional experiences led you to focus on health equity in perinatal and neonatal care?

Obviously, I'm a mom so going through my pregnancy journey, I had no idea that this was a statistic. I just thought this was something that happened to me. Clinically, though, I'm also a nurse. So I've been a nurse for 16 years now. I've always worked in community health. So I've worked for a community health center where I managed care for marginalized populations. I saw how even working in that place, which was awesome. I loved working there. Motherhood was still very, very much marginalized in itself. So the previous place I worked for was an LGBT Community Health Center, and we had some patients who were same-sex couples who wanted to have children and we did so many things to help them get to that place of pregnancy, but once they will become pregnant, we will refer them out. I always wondered if they revere us as this great place for care, comfort, and a non-judgmental space? Why are we not caring for them in the most vulnerable times of their lives? Why are we then sending them back into these stigmatized spaces that don't value who they are, and don't value their lifestyle, or don't embrace the other parts of who they are that drop them to this point? So for me, that's where my professional background met my personal goals and commitment for being that platform. So you know, as I said, we cater to all moms and women across that melinated spectrum. So that's race, ethnicity, gender, identity, and expression. That's culture, that's language. We see how all of those things mirror one another in terms of creating a supportive network. So I've seen firsthand you know how pivotal it is to have the right types of support. Building Melinated Moms, we have been able to do that and expand our community not just nationally but internationally. So we've seen ourselves, and other moms have seen themselves in our work because of that.

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What is your call to action for the industry as we seek to eliminate health and racial inequities in perinatal and neonatal care?

Yes, my call to action is bringing parents to the table to create the change that they need and deserve to see for themselves and for their children. We see so many statistics about black and brown children being disproportionately born too soon or being born very early, or with low birth weight. So our children are at the highest risk for, you know, neonatal death, health ailments, and a lot of emotional turmoil. I've also seen, even from my professional space, I used to do pediatric home care, where I will care for special needs pediatric children, whom a lot of them were preemie patients right born at 22 weeks, 24 weeks, 26 weeks. And these parents, a lot of them black and brown, didn't have these supports in their lives. They didn't have people who would listen

to them or who wanted to even engage with them. They just heard, well, this is what you need to do, figure it out. So I invite anyone who has ears to really be a part of that listening space, like listening to what their needs are, but then also creating that advocacy action plan with them instead of for them. It's very apparent whenever you're creating a solution for a specific community that if you do not include that community, it will almost always meet resistance, even if it's something that will work. You always have to have the community members at the table. That makes it a solution-based effort. So I invite anyone to be a part of that to create the solutions with the community members who are experiencing this.

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Final Remarks and Melinated Moms work with Once Upon A Premie for Black Maternal Health Week

I wrote a book called *Find Your Roar*, which turned into advocacy training, and we are so excited that Once Upon A Premie has invited us to teach our course to other premature parents of color. We are also combining our efforts for Black Maternal Health Week as a space to talk about the stigmas that have impacted childbirth and communities of color. The stigma around black premature health and black preemie parents is an area we really are excited to dive into with Jenne and with Once Upon A Premie Academy. We want to continue to support the work that she's doing while we're also activating more advocates to be a part of these conversations. So April is going to be a busy month for all of us, but I'm really excited for this partnership.

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Disclosure: The authors have no disclosures.

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About the Author: Jenné Johns, MPH:



Title: President and Founder

Organization: President, Once Upon A Premie www.onceuponapremie.com and Founder, Once Upon A Premie Academy www.onceuponapremieacademy.com

Jenné Johns, MPH is President of Once Upon A Premie, Founder of Once Upon A Premie Academy, mother of a micropreemie, author, speaker, advocate, and national senior health equity leader. Once Upon A Premie is a non-profit organization with a two-part mission: 1.) to donate Once Upon A Premie books to NICU families in under resourced communities, and 2.) lead virtual health and racial ethnic training programs and solutions to the neonatal and perinatal community through the Once Upon A Premie Academy. Jenné provides speaking, strategic planning and consultation services for fortune 500 companies focused on preemie parent needs from a cultural lens and reading as a tool for growth, development, and bonding. Jenné is also a national senior health equity thought leader and has led solutions-oriented health equity and quality improvement portfolios for the nations' largest health insurance and managed care companies.

About the Author: Jatesha “Jaye” Madden-Wilson, LPN



Title: Founding President, CEO of Melinated Moms

Organization: Melinated Moms

Bio: Jatesha “Jaye” Madden-Wilson, LPN, is a multifaceted social entrepreneur. She is a Community Health Nurse (LPN), dynamic public speaker, published author, thought leader, and the Founding President and CEO of Melinated Moms. In her professional career, Jaye applied the power of advocacy through lobbying on the state and federal levels as a community health advocate for marginalized communities. Gaining a strong understanding of the importance of advocacy, Jaye applied these principles to grow the community of Melinated Moms. Of all of her titles and accolades, the proudest title she holds is mother. She is the mother of two brilliant girls who motivate her to continue to change the world every day. That desire continues to serve as the organization's foundation and legacy.