



Patricia A. Thomas, MD, MA, FCAP  
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### **Don't Say No**

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The mother of Patricia A. Thomas, MD, MA, FCAP, was taken aback when she learned that her daughter had chosen pathology. “Being from an African-American background, especially one that is not affluent, when you’re lucky enough to go into medicine, you’re expected to give back,” Dr. Thomas said. That, she said, was why her mom wanted to know how Dr. Thomas expected to help her community “if she only worked with dead people.”

“Mom,” she said to her mother, “it’s really not that way. I can help a lot of people by screening and finding something early.”

Dr. Thomas makes good on that commitment every day as a professor of pathology and director of the Cytopathology Fellowship program at the University of Kansas (KU) Medical Center, where she specializes in fine-needle aspiration, but that’s only one piece. Until recently, Dr. Thomas chaired the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at KU, giving up the chairmanship, “so I could focus more on other things for which I have a passion,” she remarked, one of which is cytopathology. “I could become president of the United States,” Dr. Thomas said, “and I would still want to look at slides.” True, but incomplete. Dr. Thomas has residents, whom she regards more as apprentices than students. Her primary research interest is racial and ethnic disparities in breast cancer survival. There is a book on the horizon that will present the nomenclature and pathophysiology of diseases that occur in the breast in lay terms.

In a [short interview](#) posted on the FoxSports *Americans in Focus* Web series, Dr. Thomas describes her career choice as a byproduct of the death of three siblings when she was a small child. Her brother’s death was attributed to asthma, she says. While they were told that her sisters’ deaths had a respiratory cause, her parents were never able to learn anything more. “That sparked my interest in medicine,” Dr. Thomas said. “It was not just that they died, that was sad in itself, but the fact that very little explanation was given to my parents about what happened. We were in the dark, and it felt like there was no control. I grew up learning how frightening it is not to know what is going on.”

“That is another reason why I think patients should have more access to pathologists and more access to these reports and findings that are determining what is going to happen to them,” Dr. Thomas said. “I feel

they should know that these doctors who are supposedly behind the scenes are very much a part of their disease experience and that we care about them as much as the people who will actually do the surgery. I don't think everybody gets that, not even the surgeons."

Patient empowerment is also at the heart of Dr. Thomas's other job, associate dean in the Office of Cultural Enhancement and Diversity at KU Medical Center. Her staff of eight works with students and educators from local school districts (kindergarten through medical school), offering academic enrichment and encouragement to minority students with an interest in science-intensive careers.

At the Medical Center, Dr. Thomas said, "I look at the medical school curriculum and make sure we're talking about health disparities, how we can eliminate them, and why they exist in the first place." And in addition to cultivating, supporting, and guiding minority medical students, she said, they attend to faculty recruitment and retention. "You need a critical mass of people in order to maintain diversity," Dr. Thomas observed.

Forty years ago, a little girl in Leavenworth, Kansas, went to her high school guidance counselor to ask for help in sorting through the solicitations she was getting from faraway places like Bryn Mawr and Harvard. The counselor told her to think about junior college. Shortly thereafter, a recruiter from Harvard handed her a roundtrip ticket to Boston with just three words: "Don't say no."

Good advice. And Patricia Thomas, MD, MA, FCAP, a graduate of Harvard, University of Kansas Graduate School in Biology and Biochemistry, and the New York University School of Medicine, has been paying it forward ever since.