

Physician Assistant Lenny Smith on Moving Beyond Comfort Zones, Taking Steps Toward Change

Physician assistant Lenny Smith strives to make a positive difference in the lives of others, including recognizing cultural differences and reducing disparities among patients of color.



When Lenny Smith came to Kaiser Permanente (formerly Group Health) in Everett in 1994, he did so deliberately. He trained to become an advanced paneled practice provider/physician assistant with MEDEX Northwest at UW and did his preceptorship at Rainier Medical Center, where numerous patients and staff shared his skin color. He could have stayed at the Rainier clinic, but he didn't want to be comfortable — instead, he wanted to stretch beyond what was familiar.

Turns out, he's good at making *others* comfortable.

About 6 years ago, an octogenarian patient came in for an appointment. Unbeknownst to Lenny, she wasn't comfortable with African American men. When she was in her 20s — 60 years ago, during another time of social unrest — she was attacked in an elevator and hadn't been exposed to African American men since. He learned this later when she came in for another appointment — but not for follow-up. Just to talk. She wanted him to know that he made her feel comfortable, and she wasn't scared anymore. From there, they developed a great clinician/patient relationship and saw each other many times. That she was able to be open and allow her opinion to change says a lot about Lenny.

When asked why he chose Everett, Lenny said, "I felt like I could do more here in terms of exposing folks to us. I love what I do, love taking care of all people. I work hard to make a positive difference in the lives of everyone I touch. If anything was to ever change, we need exposure to people who are different, and there weren't many African Americans in Everett at that time (and still aren't). I wanted to change minds, change the world. Even if I changed just one mind."

He definitely changed his patient's mind. When asked why she felt comfortable, Lenny said, "I don't know. I think it's something that's just 'in you.' I didn't have a playbook, and there wasn't a policy."

However, learning about cultural differences and implicit bias can enhance both patient and workplace experience, bias from which KPWA isn't immune.

He continued, "Our medical system isn't set up to flex for different cultures. But that's where we run into problems. Because as much as we want to believe we're all the same, we're not."

Racism and health care are antithetical. The legacy of systemic racism shows up as:

- Disproportionate COVID-19 diagnoses, suffering, and deaths
- Higher burden of chronic disease such as hypertension, diabetes, and ASCVD at younger ages
- Maternal mortality and morbidity that lags behind impoverished, developing nations
- Far too few Black, Hispanic, and Native American doctors, nurses, health professionals, and health care leaders

Reflecting on our current environment, Lenny says it's unfortunate how we came to have these conversations, and yet we must. Knowing is a step toward change, coupled with gathering information about lived experiences. Developing those informed strategies is one reason WPMG is currently undergoing an Inclusive Climate Assessment survey for the first time. The survey focuses on equity, inclusion and diversity in the workplace, and is open until September 6. Lenny says, "We might learn things that aren't so pleasant. If you can't see it, you can't fix it."

(WPMG clinicians and staff: to learn more about and participate in the survey, view [this story](#) on Permanente Pulse.)

As part of a new equity, inclusion and diversity team at the Everett Medical Center, Lenny's working to form a Patient Advisory Group to help identify community needs for patients of color and ways to address them. For now, they're taking suggestions and incorporating these into day-to-day work, including how they recognize disparities among patients of color. A joint effort between medical and health plan staff, with support from leadership, the team also serves as a place to share experience, openly, honestly, and safely. They're currently recruiting for additional planning committee members. Lenny says, "For me, this work is our way out of darkness."

About Lenny, Brandon Van Corbach, DNP, RN, Everett's Clinical Operations Manager, said, "Lenny runs an incredible huddle, speaks from the heart, and although he improvises and talks on the fly without prepared speeches, his comments are always right on time, on par, and leave you thinking about things in a new way."

Note: In September, KPWA's Journey to Anti-Racism series continues with Racism in Health Care. Everyone is encouraged to participate in one of two Zoom gatherings to build an understanding of racism in health care. Each session will cover the same content and registration is available at [KP Learn](#). Sessions are available on [Wednesday September 23 from noon to 1 p.m.](#) or [Thursday, September 24 from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.](#)

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Cook, Rob 8/31/2020 11:45 AM

I have had the pleasure of working with Lenny closley for a number of years and I can tell you he is beloved by the patient population he cares for. He is very kind, caring and genuine. Weve had conversations in the past about some of the things he has seen in his life and those conversations have stayed with me and have helped shaped me-I appreciate you Lenny-Thank you.

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I was moved when reading the story and the positive work Lenny is doing in his community. It takes courage for everyone to have these conversations and dialog. I ask myself, what is in my heart as I interact with people who are different than me. Regardless of who you are and what your status is, what's in your heart is what comes out when you interact with people. As we continue on this journey of change, I am hopeful more hearts will change for the better as human beings.

~Terence

