

# *closing the health gap*

By Greg Kestenbaum

*Not all populations have benefited equally from advances in cancer treatment. With Tower's help and the generosity of the Lippin Family, USC staffer and cancer survivor **Ghecemy Lopez** is fighting to change that disparity.*

**J**udging by the headlines alone, you might gather that cancer is in its final days. In January of this year, the American Cancer Society (ACS) reported that the cancer death rate in the United States fell 2.2 percent from 2016 to 2017—the largest single-year decline in cancer mortality ever reported.

With the billions of dollars being poured into cutting edge technology and genetically targeted cures, we seem to be on the verge of eradicating the disease, making it a scourge of our collective past.

But not all populations have benefited equally from advances in cancer treatment. According to the same report from the ACS, cancer occurrence and outcomes still vary considerably between racial and ethnic groups, largely because of inequalities in wealth that lead to differences in risk factor exposure and barriers to high-quality cancer prevention. Although these racial and socioeconomic disparities in cancer care are narrowing, the report found that black men were still twice as likely to die of cancer as Asian/Pacific Islander men and 20 percent more likely to die than white men.

**The Ronnie Lippin  
Cancer Support and  
Navigation Program at**

**USC**, supported by Tower Cancer Research Foundation, was founded to further narrow this health gap, ensuring that historically disadvantaged populations have equal access to quality cancer care, early detection methods, and information about cancer treatments.

Juggling a massive caseload of more than one hundred cancer patients and their caregivers at any given time, program manager Ghecemy Lopez helps her clients navigate an often complicated and confusing health care landscape.

Since 2016, Lopez has conducted outreach to communities in East and South Los Angeles, connecting patients with the appropriate resources and providing them with the social support that many of them do not have. In places like South L.A. and Pico-Union that have elevated rates of metastatic cancer, there is also a limited number of oncology providers per capita. “There is cancer all over, but the communities I work in face substantial barriers to quality treatment. The disparities are abysmal,” Lopez says.

Further, when services are available, they’re not always culturally tailored. “I have patients who might not even know what Medi-Cal is, so I’ll have to connect them. The health gap can’t be explained merely as a problem of access. To close the gap, we need to educate communities and address the needs of underrepresented populations. We need more outreach and education to promote prevention and screening.”

“Our program reaches people in their language and is trauma-informed and patient-centered,” Lopez says. Around 65% of her patients are monolingual in Spanish, and even for the ones that speak English, the medical lingo can be impenetrable.

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And Lopez knows firsthand how difficult it can

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be. “I was a patient myself,” she reveals. Lopez’s own harrowing battle with cancer reveals the inequalities of the system and the isolating impact a diagnosis can have.

Even though she had insurance through her employer, it was hard for Lopez to find resources in neighborhoods in Southeast Los Angeles. “The only resources were at the hospital, and my care wasn’t there. I didn’t have a support group or a nonprofit like Tower that I could go to and get information,” she says. “All the best resources were on the Westside, and that was too far for me at the time, especially with the treatment. I was feeling dizzy, and I couldn’t drive. My husband was working and was unable to take time off,” she says. Eventually, Lopez’s parents flew in from Mexico, but they didn’t speak the language, and they didn’t have drivers licenses. “I felt so isolated,” Lopez reflects.

The treatment put Lopez out of work for six months, and the loss of income was devastating. She and her husband got into so much medical debt that they ultimately filed for bankruptcy, a story that has become frustratingly commonplace—medical bills are now the leading cause of bankruptcies in the U.S. “The bills keep coming, and you have to make a decision about whether you’re going to pay for the groceries or the electricity bill,” says Lopez. “At that moment, had I had a person or a program like this one, I would have been told that there were options for me. But I didn’t have that program.”

And Lopez didn’t even have the barriers that most of her patients deal with. She and her husband are both working professionals, both with their master’s degrees, and both bilingual. “When I have patients come in and tell me they’re overwhelmed, I think back to my own story. I do my best to put myself in their shoes.”

Lopez works with each patient as an advocate, first formulating an action plan and looking at their

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challenges aside from cancer. But she’s more than an advocate: “My patients are like family,” she says. Many invite her to birthday parties, lunches on the weekends, and even funerals. “When you work with a community, you create real bonds with the patients,” she says.

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Sometimes the emotional burden can be overwhelming, being so close to the people she serves. “Compassion fatigue is a real thing,” Lopez says, “especially when we lose patients or when patients come to me very late. It’s very difficult to not feel powerless and sad for them, but I have to do self-care and find my ability to remain strong for them.”

Lopez’s program is funded through Tower and the Lippin family, and Lopez could not be more grateful for the support. “We work together with Tower to make sure that people have the quality of service that Tower offers, but on this side of town,” she says. “Tower has such a good reputation for so many years in the cancer community. They help us balance out our technology, research, and clinical availability, bringing us closer to closing the health gap in our own city.”

In November of 2019, Tower supported a conference at USC spearheaded by Lopez and her team, showcasing the latest in innovative research available. The event was a massive success: “We were able to bring together the best researchers in the field, who were able to express their results in a patient-friendly manner, using average person lingo. We featured people from all walks of life on our panels,” Lopez says.

For Lopez, her work at USC is more than a job: “This is my mission,” she says. Every day, she goes to bat for her patients, and every day, she brings us a little closer to closing the health gap. ■