



GINA GREEN-HARRIS, MBA

## RELATIONSHIPS

## BEFORE RESEARCH

by Beth Pinkerton

**G**ina Green-Harris, MBA, is known to build successful community-academic partnerships by putting people first.

Based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she serves as the director for several University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH) programs—the Center for Community Engagement and Health Partnerships; Lifecourse Initiative for Healthy Families; Wisconsin Alzheimer’s Institute (WAI) Regional Milwaukee Office; and All of Us Research Program in Milwaukee.

She describes herself as a “recruitment scientist” and bridge builder, connecting underrepresented communities together to

develop innovative, culturally appropriate research and community engagement projects that can lead to improved health outcomes for our most disparate populations. With her guidance, the Wisconsin Idea of applying university research to improve the health and quality of life for all residents comes to life in communities that traditionally have been neglected.

In 2008, she joined the SMPH as a program manager for the WAI under the leadership of then-Director Mark Sager, MD, professor of medicine. Green-Harris was hired to implement a new pilot project to create dialogue with African Americans about dementia and recruit people for the Wisconsin Registry for Alzheimer’s Prevention

(WRAP), the world’s largest parental history cohort study of Alzheimer’s disease (AD).

Though African Americans have up to twice the risk of developing some form of dementia compared to non-Hispanic whites, lack of access to providers, less education and a reluctance to discuss AD meant that African Americans weren’t being diagnosed. As WRAP personnel began to meet with the community, Green-Harris realized it was critical to do something different, and the first step was to develop a relationship with the community based on mutual respect.

“As well-intended as we were, UW-Madison and the UW School of Medicine and Public Health didn’t have the best track record in this regard,” she says. “As we

were talking with community stakeholders, we heard stories about investigators who had come to Milwaukee and collected data, but never returned. There was distrust all around.”

Along with her team, Green-Harris spent the first 18 months listening to people in the community, bringing feedback to campus and coaching researchers on how to engage the community. They worked with community members to create the Community Advisory Board to give a voice to the local people.

“You can’t go in there wearing your white coats and think you’re going to save everyone. You have to understand that, from a practical standpoint, you may be a smart person with content knowledge, but when you step into the community, the community member is the expert,” Green-Harris notes.

She adds that it is important to start with questions such as, “Is there anything you need?” before mentioning a research study. Initially, she and the outreach team focused on talking with families about AD, and helping them get diagnosed and learn to navigate the health care system. Outreach Coordinator Stephanie Houston, MBA, helped design and implement a dementia care model.

The team also brought the Amazing Grace Chorus to Milwaukee. This innovative program goes beyond singing to providing resources and support to caregivers and their loved ones who have AD. They find joy in the experience of singing together, while becoming connected to a new family and getting information and resources about the disease.

By “meeting people where they are,” Green-Harris and her team doubled the number of African American participants in the WRAP. That philosophy also guides her work with the Lifecourse Initiative for Healthy Families, an asset-based community model aimed at improving conditions that lead to healthier birth outcomes among African American families in Kenosha, Milwaukee and Racine, Wisconsin.

The initiative recently made changes to give families a voice at the table, help local

organizations develop infrastructures for sustainability, and address stressors related to systemic racism.

Green-Harris says it is easy for outsiders—when they don’t take time to learn from the community about what is working—to overlook positive elements of communities that suffer high levels of disparity.

“If you look only at our ZIP Code, you miss a lot about the uniqueness, potential and resilience of the people of Milwaukee,” says Green-Harris, whose experience, including being born in Los Angeles and raised in Milwaukee, has influenced the lens through which she considers health equity.

She observes, “Most program funding and research grants come from a perspective of a deficit—how many Black folks die from stroke? How many people are dying from COVID-19? How many people are suffering from hypertension in high-risk communities? My question is, how many people are not? Who is surviving and thriving, and why? Let’s build on that data to create research and programs that will change our outcomes.”

Green-Harris is committed to helping evolve the narrative around health disparities. Hoping to be part of the solution, she believes in the “Talented Tenth” model described by W.E.B Du Bois, who charged educated Blacks to use their gifts, time and treasures to reinvest in communities and improve the health of future generations.

After graduating with a psychology degree from Central State University, a historically Black college in Wilberforce, Ohio, Green-Harris created community programming for people living with HIV/AIDS in Dayton. She returned to Wisconsin to work for the Department of Corrections, where she created a neighborhood supervision program and a restitution program for families who were victims of crime.

Next, recognizing her strengths, the Ohio Commission on Minority Health recruited Green-Harris into a role that took her to all 77 Ohio counties to find small “mom and pop” organizations working with HIV-positive

families. She was responsible for coaching the organizations on business planning, helping them attain 501(c)3 status and finding fiduciary agencies to support them. This work led her to earn a master of business administration degree from Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio.

“Larger organizations tended to be majority organizations, and smaller ones generally were minority-run groups. I aimed to bring together their gifts of talent,” reflects Green-Harris, who now is working toward a doctorate in clinical investigation at UW-Madison and is an inaugural fellow in the UW Institute for Clinical Research and Intervention’s fellowship program.

“Working for UW-Madison has been one of the best experiences of my life. I have grown professionally and personally. I am so proud to be part of an institution that is working with integrity and intention to continue the Wisconsin Idea for generations to come.”

In September 2020, Green-Harris was appointed as the inaugural chair of the Governor’s Health Equity Council. The 33-member group is charged with creating a comprehensive plan to achieve equitable health outcomes for all people in Wisconsin, namely by addressing health disparities based on race, economic status, education level, history of incarceration and geographic location.

About this appointment, Green-Harris says, “It is an honor to work with many great leaders across the state. I am humbled, and I look forward to working to create a plan that will become part of the fabric of health equity for Wisconsin, as well as a model for others across the country.”

She continues, “At the end of the day, if we hope to see health equity, we have to reach the people who have the most disparate conditions, and research is critical and essential to changing the narrative.”

And reflecting on the big picture, Green-Harris concludes, “I am thankful that I get to be a change agent for innovative research and strategic programming that will impact the lives of many who would otherwise be left behind.”

