

# Getting To Know You - Dr. Leah Backhus

By Dr. Elizabeth Colwell



Dr. Leah Backhus completed her undergraduate work at Stanford University and her medical school and general surgery training at the University of Southern California. She completed her Cardiothoracic Surgery fellowship at University of California Los Angeles. In addition, she obtained a MPH from the University of Washington.

After completing her training, Dr. Backhus began her career as a Thoracic Surgeon at the University of Washington where she practiced for six years before being recruited back to her undergraduate alma mater, Stanford, where she is an associate professor and section Chief of Thoracic Surgery at the Palo Alto VA.

## How did you choose to go into medicine?

I wanted to pursue a career in medicine from a fairly young age. I can remember when I was in the

6th grade that I announced (to anyone who would listen) that I wanted to go to Stanford (someone once told me it was the Harvard of the West Coast) and I wanted to be a Neurosurgeon. I liked solving problems and puzzles and I thought what better way to pursue that than to try to solve the puzzles of the brain.

## Why did you choose thoracic surgery?

I held on to the notion of being a neurosurgeon all the way until the summer between 1st and 2nd year of medical school at USC. I had set up a meeting with the Chair of Neurosurgery at the time and I remember being very nervous about the meeting and what I would say. Needless to say, the meeting did not go well in terms of fostering my interest in that field of medicine. He was very negative and I left feeling fairly discouraged. My 'Big Sibling' (an upper class student mentor) was a 4th year student who had just matched into General Surgery. He encouraged me to consider General Surgery and at least to explore other surgical options. About the only thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to do something surgical since General Medicine was not for me. During my clinical years my decision to pursue General Surgery was reaffirmed and I eagerly

began my internship at USC. I think some of my most formative general surgery experiences were on the Trauma Service at LAC+USC Medical Center with ample penetrating trauma in that knife and gun club. My first ED thoracotomy was truly amazing to see that sometimes we could actually save some of these patients with devastating injuries. At USC, we also had the unique experience of rotating in either Thoracic or Cardiac Surgery one to two times each year so I had ample exposure to CT Surgery. What I was most struck by was the extreme high acuity of the patients we were treating, but the relative calm cool and collectedness of the attending surgeons who operated on and cared for them. They maintained their composure even under the most extreme circumstances and added another element of civility in dealing with life or death decisions that moved beyond the ED Trauma Bay. By my third year in General



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Surgery, I had signed up for a 2 year research fellowship with Ross Bremner in his Thoracic Oncology Lab and was well on my way to a career in Thoracic Surgery.

**What is your most memorable moment from your years of training?**

There are too many moments to list here! There were many experiences during training that helped to shape me, and they span the spectrum of extraordinarily good to bad. One of the most sobering experiences I recall was from CT Surgery residency at UCLA. At the old hospital we had a combined CTICU which housed adults but also pediatric patients until they were stable to go to the PICU. We took care of one baby who had had several operations, but was nonetheless on ECMO and had several failed attempts at decannulation. This was to be the last attempt. Myself, the attending and a PA decannulated the baby with the parents just outside in the waiting room. This time, she did reasonably well...but only for an hour. She quickly began to deteriorate as she had done on the previous occasions. We informed the family she was not expected to live and she passed away in the next couple of hours. The fact that she passed away was not unexpected neither for the family nor for me. The part that I was most upset by was the fact that I

truly felt hopeful in the first hour that we had succeeded and beat the odds; that we had managed to cheat death. I was very wrong and that disappointment was most humbling. We are but mere instruments although fortunate at times to lend a hand in helping what has already been determined.

**What do you think is the toughest part of your job?**

Balancing! Of course there is the ever present work-life balancing act that all of us do, however there are so many other competing aspects of your job that also require balancing. This is something that I think I have gotten a lot better at over the years, but something I struggled with early on. I think many do the same. How much of your time you devote to administration, clinical care, research and teaching all have a huge impact on your career well-being and longevity in a given job position. The targets are often moving and distractions are everywhere. One of my mentors who is a pediatrician once told me, whenever you are considering taking on a new



task/project, ask yourself what value it brings to YOU. If you are unable to answer it quickly and meaningfully, then you probably shouldn't do it.

**What are you most proud of in your career thus far?**

I am proud of my teaching in the OR. I am proud of having grateful patients. I am proud that despite my career ambitions, my children love and admire me and I remain happily married to my wonderful husband.

I am proud of having taken the two years out to pursue an MPH to retrain myself for a career in health services research while working full time and sowing

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my early assistant professor oats. It was a valuable investment in my future career.

I am also proud of my mentees and the legacy of promise that I often wind up representing to young females and African Americans in medicine and in surgery in particular. I have mentored many students from high school through junior faculty through the institutions I have worked and beyond. In addition to WTS, some of these include the Association of Women in Surgeons, Student National Medical Association (SNMA), the Society of Black Academic Surgeons, the and Stanford National Black Alumni Association. I also helped to found Artemis Medical Society whose mission it is: "to serve, nurture and celebrate a global sisterhood of women physicians of color. Through mentoring, networking and advocacy, we provide the foundation necessary to

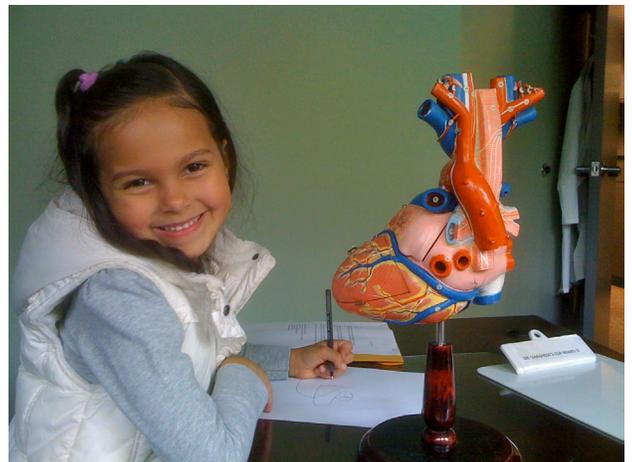


create a diverse physician workforce vital to our society." Through Artemis I have also partnered with Disney Jr. and helped promote Black History Month among its young viewers.

**Are there any mentors who have made a difference/ impact in your career?**

Mentorship is critical. I strongly believe that NO ONE succeeds without appropriate mentorship. You need mentors at every stage and in many forms. Each mentor will offer something very specific. As a mentee you need to do your own due diligence and know who to ask, when and for what specifically. You have to bring something to the mentor even if it is merely your overwhelming enthusiasm and dedication to achieving a certain goal. I can recall as a 2nd year general surgery resident rotating on the Burn Service. I truly disliked this rotation and it showed. My work was adequate, but clearly I did not enjoy being there. The chief of service called me aside for a talk. Knowing that he couldn't actually criticize my work, he instead honed in on my apparent unhappiness. However, rather than take a reassuring stance, he asked me if I had a mentor. I told him I had a faculty advisor

(one assigned to me as an intern). He then told me that I needed to seek and acquire a black female surgeon to mentor me. Needless to say, I was a bit taken aback and wanted to laugh at him right then and there! Where on the planet was I to find such a person. I had seen none in my short medical career up to that point. Was there some clearinghouse? Could you order one online? Times have changed and I definitely see many more potential mentors for young surgeons like me, but he was right in one respect...I DID need a mentor. He



was wrong however, in that she needn't be black, nor female. But I needed someone in my corner so to speak. Since then I have accumulated many mentors who have bestowed upon me invaluable advice.

**What do you like to do outside of work?**

I have a 10 and 11 year old and running after them and their activities takes a ton of time and energy. Whenever possible, however,

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I mostly enjoy traveling with my family. This summer we are going to Tanzania, which will be the first time any of us has traveled to Africa.

### What advice do you have for young female surgeons balancing work and family life?

After many years struggling with the true definition of balance, I would say to young people, that balance is in the eye of the

beholder. No one person can define balance for another person. I think of our lives as a pie. We all divide our pie however we see fit. We have different categories and different sizes that we allocate for each category. Take the bull by the horns and define your pie and slice it yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help (we all need it) but don't let anyone tell you that you are out of balance.

### What has the WTS meant to you as an organization?

WTS is a gamechanger. It is a platform where our small subgroup of surgeons can shine and be elevated to help level the playing field. I can remember once when I lost a patient that left a profound impact on me. I went to my office and finally let go the tears that I had been holding in up until that point. At that time I thought to myself, "would my male colleagues be in their office crying at this moment if they were in my position?" Although I figured the answer was most likely NO, the more profound thing was that I realized I didn't care. This is me. I am a Thoracic Surgeon, but I am also many other things. I am female, I am African American, I am a mother, a daughter, a friend. WTS allows me to be my authentic self and have that celebrated within my chosen profession!

## Thank you Meg Drumm

Meg,

It was such a pleasure to have worked with you over the past several years. You were always pleasant, smiling, helpful, and followed through on plans! You were always kind, helpful as well as incredibly efficient, effective and always available when I needed you. We cannot thank you enough in words. We will miss working closely with you. We wish you the absolute best in the years to come.

Sincerely,  
WTS

