

Michele R. Wright, Ph.D., Recipient of the Nations of Women Change Makers 2021 Global Leadership Award

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By Jules Lavallee

Dr. Wright is the Co-Founder and Board Chair of the National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis (NOAACF), a 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to engage, educate, and raise cystic fibrosis (CF) awareness in the African-American community in an effort to help bring valuable resources, knowledge, empowerment, and support to CF patients, families, healthcare professionals, and the community. She also co-founded and co-chairs the annual BIOMERGD (Blacks, Indigenous, and Other Minority Ethnicities with Rare and Genetic Diseases) Conference and led the development of a Cystic Fibrosis screening tool to help individuals self-identify symptoms that could be related to CF and doctors potentially identify individuals with CF, including individuals who are black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC).

You are the recipient of the Nations of Women Change Makers 2021 Global Leadership Award. Share your background and what this award means to you.

Receiving the Nations of Women (NOW) Leadership Award is such a great honor. I am delighted to be included among the phenomenal NOW tribe of diverse, unique, empowering, inspiring, and connecting women from across the globe working individually, collectively, and synergistically to bring about a positive change that will significantly impact today and generations to come! And as NOW Founder, President & CEO, Dr. Tina Alton, says, “Women who influence change know their worth!” As a Leader and Change Maker, my life mantra is “The BEST is yet to come!” The BEST requires knowing that we and our worth and influence are stronger together than separate.

Influential change is not only about yourself, but those you can positively pull along with you to bigger, greater, and higher heights. For as Melissa Gates exclaims, “Remember that no one is a born Change-Maker. It’s something you become when you see a problem, then dare to become part of the solution.” I have brought about unique change through a series of events that I have established, participated in, and supported personally and professionally through my desire to bring positive influence and drive effective change.

I am a multi-dimensional Senior Executive with experience providing dynamic leadership in diverse roles, including pharmaceutical/biotechnology sales, healthcare administration, and business development to Fortune 100 companies and an international non-profit organization. With advanced degrees in engineering and public policy, I bring a sensibility to executive roles, combining the ability to share and communicate a vision for meaningful change along with a practical approach to implementation and administration.

I served as the Vice President of Sales for Paragon BioTeck Company and as Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing with Pathology Partners. I am the former Chief Executive Officer of the Greater Ozarks-Arkansas Region with the American Red Cross.

As the former CEO of the American Red Cross Greater Arkansas Ozarks Region and having sickle cell trait myself, I became quickly aware that people with sickle cell disease require regular blood transfusions throughout their life, and while a blood donor from any ethnicity can be a match, the best possible match for African Americans with sickle cell is from other African American donors. As such, I forged a regional collaborative initiative with several organizations throughout our community in an effort to substantially increase the number of diverse blood donors across the state and potentially the entire nation. Through my first Arkansas statewide blood drive with a regional assembly of 40-plus churches, we were able to recruit more than 250 members (with 137 blood donations successfully collected) for this initiative, thus marking the largest turnout of African-American donors and the highest number of African-American blood units collected at a single event in the history of American Red Cross-GOAR.

I also partnered with Sickle Cell Support Services to conduct numerous radio interviews throughout Sickle Cell Awareness month and to further bring this vision and mission to fruition. One of my many achievements was the development of a nationally distributed video on “Why Give?” which was ultimately used as a national tool for the successful recruitment of diverse donors within multiple regions throughout the American Red Cross. Consequently, this video has become a Red Cross staple in the recruitment of African American blood donors.

I am a national and international multiple award-winning Corporate Leader who has worked with top-ranked corporations including Genentech Biotech Company, Novartis Pharmaceuticals, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, and The Procter and Gamble Company. I have a successful track record in increasing productivity, inventory accuracy, operational efficiency, and cost reductions and have top sales performance in food, pharmaceutical, and biotechnology sales. I am a specialist in project, team, and total quality management.

I am the past recipient of Equanimity's "Visionary Voice Award" for my community influence, impact, and outreach as well as Sister Friends United, Inc. "Women of Excellence Business Award" and inaugural "Five-Year Service Award".

I obtained a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, with a double specialization in Health and Leadership Policy; a Master of Science degree from the University of Tennessee Space Institute (UTSI), where I chartered the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) and was UTSI's first African-American full-time student to earn a Master's degree in Engineering Management/Industrial Engineering; and a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering from Tuskegee University, where I was Miss Engineering, President of the Engineering Representative Council, and graduated Electrical Engineering Student of the Year. I live in North Little Rock, Arkansas with my husband, Terry Wright.

Tell us about your work in health advocacy.

Health advocacy is an integral part of my DNA. Interestingly enough, I was born at the John A. Andrew Memorial Hospital, a former teaching hospital (opened 1892-1987) on the campus of Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama, where the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study took place. This unique connection has impacted and influenced my passion for health equity. But this was only the beginning of my health advocacy journey.

Today, my mission in health advocacy includes helping to make a difference in an array of areas, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in the cystic fibrosis community. When my husband, Terry Wright, an African American man who will turn 59-years old on August 16, 2021, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at the age of 54, we knew we had to bring about change as it relates to health disparities, biased healthcare, and disproportionate late diagnosis in the African-American community. Thus, in 2020, we co-founded the 501(c)(3) organization, **The National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis (NOAACF)**, with the mission to engage, educate, and raise CF awareness in the African-American community and to help bring valuable resources, knowledge, empowerment, and support to CF patients, families, healthcare professionals, and the community. I serve as NOAACF Board Chair and Executive Director.

My husband and I have made it our individual and collective mission to raise awareness about the kinds of health disparities faced in racial and ethnic communities. Our work and influence in health equity and health advocacy are already worldwide known and widely respected. We were recently featured in the May 26, 2021 online issue and June 15, 2021 print issue (Volume 325, Number 23, Pages 2323-2410) of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), in an article titled "*Tackling the Misconception That Cystic Fibrosis Is a 'White People's Disease'*", (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2780564>) written by JAMA Senior Editor Rita Rubin, MA.

Much of your work focuses on health equity and addressing health disparities. What are your initiatives today?

Yes, I am fully committed to focusing on health equity and addressing health disparities!

I led the development of **The Wright Cystic Fibrosis Screening Tool**© to help people self-identify symptoms that *could be related to CF* as well as help medical providers identify people who may have CF, especially those who are BIPOC.

Simultaneously, my husband Terry and I launched our **Advocating for Health Equity and Addressing Disparities**© (AHEAD) Initiative with a mission to increase awareness of health disparities in minority and underserved communities and to introduce a successful roadmap and advancement strategies toward achieving health equity in healthcare, clinical treatment, medical diagnosis, and clinical trials across a multitude of disadvantaged populations.

Through our AHEAD initiative, we will help an array of organizations with educational content, assessment methods, and short- or long-term consultancy to evaluate their institutional culture and climate, set health equity goals, and transform the experiences of patients and families from marginalized backgrounds.

Additionally, in 2021, Terry and I co-founded and co-chaired the annual **Blacks, Indigenous, and Other Minority Ethnicities with Rare and Genetic Diseases (BIOMERGD)** Conference to help increase awareness of rare diseases in BIPOC communities by focusing on one genetic disease and one rare disease each year. In 2021, our inaugural conference focused on cystic fibrosis (as a genetic disease) and lupus (as a rare disease). In 2022, our BIOMERGD Conference will address sickle cell disease (genetic disease) and leukemia (rare disease). For more information, visit <https://noacf.org/>.

We also released my husband's surreal journey to his late diagnosis with cystic fibrosis in his children's coloring storybook, **Terry's Journey to CF Land: Navigating the Adventures of Cystic Fibrosis**©, to help inspire, uplift, and amuse children who have cystic fibrosis and empower them on their own journey to CF land. This book was listed in the top spot on BookAuthority's "8 Best New Cystic Fibrosis Books To Read In 2021".

I also wrote, directed, and produced the movie, **54 YEARS LATE**©, a film that tells the gut-wrenching true-life story of my Terry's late diagnosis of cystic fibrosis at the age of 54 despite being seen by an array of healthcare practitioners, enduring countless hospitalizations and surgeries, and having all the classic symptoms of CF – a progressive and genetic disease that's often perceived to affect only the Caucasian population.

Produced by my own Butterbean Productions company, **54 YEARS LATE** has officially been accepted and a winner in numerous 2021 Film Festivals – including:

- Cystic Fibrosis Awareness Film Festival (**Award Winner – Best Documentary and People's Choice Award**)
- Hollywood Gold Awards (**Award Winner – Silver Award for Best First Time Director**)
- Best Shorts Competition (**Award Winner – Best Documentary Short, Best African American Film, and Best Women Filmmakers**)

- Naples Film Awards (**Award Winner – Best Short Film**)
- Amsterdam International Film Festival (**Award Winner – Best Original Story**)
- Krimson Horyzon International Film Festival (**Award Winner – Phenomenal Attainment Award for Best Short Film, Best Documentary Film, and Best First Time Film Maker’s Award**)
- Royal Society of Television & Motion Picture Awards (**Award Winner – Outstanding Achievement Award for Best Director, Best Cinematography (Fiction & Documentary), Best Documentary Films, and Best Short Films**)
- Independent Shorts Awards (**Finalist – Best Director (Female) and Best Documentary Short**)
- California Women’s Film Festival (**Finalist – Best Shorts Scripts**)
- The Oaks International Film Festival (**Finalist – Best US Short**)
- Roma Short Film Festival (**Finalist – Best Short Films Main Competition**)
- Action on Film MegaFest 16th/17th Annual Film Festival and Writers’ Competition 2020/2021 (**Finalist – Best True Stories – Short**)
- Newfilmmakers NY (**Semi-Finalist – Best Short Film/Best Documentary**)
- IndieX Film Fest (**Semi-Finalist – Best Documentary Short**)
- Indie Short Fest (**Semi-Finalist – Best Documentary Short**)
- Social World Film Festival (**Quarter-Finalist – Best Short Films**)

I am expecting many more wins in the coming weeks/months. However, my (our) dream is to see **54 YEARS LATE: *The Terry Wright Story***© make it to Hollywood’s big screen as a full-length movie feature.

My husband and I achieved major health advocacy educational, awareness, and support based milestones through a multitude of programs, events, and platforms through our participation in an array of conferences, roundtables, podcasts, and discussions of health equity and disparities (in 2020-21 alone) including the 2021 35th North American Cystic Fibrosis Conference (NACFC), 2021 BioMarin’s Patient Advocacy Policy Initiative (PAPI) committee, 2021 CF Fighter Panel, 2021 Public Advisory Roundtable (PAR) of the American Thoracic Society (ATS) virtual roundtable “Conversation on Health Disparities”, 2021 ResearchCon, 2021 “But You Look Healthy” podcast, 2021 Cystic Fibrosis Research Institute’s (CFRI)’s Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Community, 2021 Bonnell Foundation: living with cystic fibrosis podcast, 2021 Cystic Fibrosis Foundation Tomorrow’s Leaders “CF 101: CF In Real Life” National virtual event, 2021 Vertex Pharmaceuticals’ Healthcare Disparities and Rare Diseases Panel, 2021/2020 CF Roundtable produced by the US Adult Cystic Fibrosis Association (USACFA), 2020 “ATS Patient Voices 9” published by ATS PAR, 2020 CFRI’s “A Breath of Fresh Air” Virtual Gala, 2020 Bonnell Foundation Virtual “Night of Hope” Celebration, 2020 Cystic Fibrosis Foundation-Arkansas Chapter’s Leadership 2020 Board meeting, 2020 NACFC, 2020 BreatheCon, 2020 Cystic Fibrosis Foundation publication of its diversity Web-Story, “*CF Foundation Seeks Input from Communities of Color*”.

What do you want people to know today?

It is important for people to know and understand that health equity should be the rule and not the exception. However, disparities extend beyond health. So often, underserved organizations are on the roster to represent minoritized groups but are often less likely to receive much-needed donations, support, and/or corporate sponsorships. Thus, although our organization, the National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis (NOAACF), is the primary voice for

African Americans in the CF community, our work cannot be done on prestige and notoriety alone. It takes funds and resources.

We are asking people to help by supporting and making donations to NOAACF's 501(c)(3) non-profit organization (i.e., Facebook Birthday posts, employee match programs, etc.). Donations can be made via our website, <https://noaacf.org/> or direct mail (NOAACF, P.O. Box 13402, Maumelle, Arkansas 72113). We are also asking corporations and organizations to partner and collaborate with us so that we in turn can help other socially disadvantaged individuals in the cystic fibrosis and rare disease space (i.e., dental bills).

We also want to encourage people to not lose hope! We all have an integral part to play in this puzzle of life. And health equity is just one major puzzle piece that we can work together cohesively to bring about positive and life-changing influence for today and generations to come!

You are the creator of My Water Buddy and Family and the author and creator of THE WATER TALES: Ten Life Lessons from My Water. Tell us about these projects and book.

When I struggled to drink water and noticed others (including children) struggling to drink water, I quickly learned that I was not alone and created **My Water Buddy and Family®**, an edutainment brand with the mission to educationally and entertainingly promote the benefits of drinking water to children and their families for a more fulfilling quality of life through a healthier body. This edutainment brand uses fun characters fashioned as humanlike organs with special powers that are relatable and aspirational to children.

The main character of the brand is **My Water Buddy®**, a unique personification of water (H₂O) and the human body. My Water Buddy embodies "The Family", which consists of various anthropomorphic parts of the body and organ characters that drinking water positively impacts, including Airy and Breezy the Twin Lungs, Boney the Bone, Brawny the Muscle, Flowy the Blood Drop, Flushy and Gushy the Twin Kidneys, Pumpy the Heart, Tummy the Stomach, and Whizzy the Brain.

I also authored a 2021 Podcast and a 2020 children's book, both titled "***THE WATER TALES: Ten Life Lessons from My Water Buddy and Family®***", an adventurous collection of ten adventurous short children's stories that tell different tales centered around the importance of water, in addition to tapping into life topics that are important to children: autism, bullying, fears, self-esteem, peer pressure, etc.

The Water Tales podcast was a winner of two major 2021 film festivals including (1) The Accolade Global Film Competition and (2) The Queens Underground International Black and Brown Film Festival.

I hope to bring "My Water Buddy and Family" to the big screen as a full-length animated film with nationwide release and acclaim and to develop it into an edutainment animated series. For more information, visit <https://www.mywaterbuddy.com/>.

Tell us about My Learning Buddy, Inc. What is your vision for 2021?

During a time when the 2019-20 coronavirus pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to the near-total closures of schools, universities, and colleges, I founded **My Learning Buddy Inc.®**, the academic arm of My Water Buddy and Family, Inc., to benefit elementary school students, teachers, administrators, and educational facilities throughout the coronavirus pandemic and beyond.

My Learning Buddy offers a virtual distant-learning and interactive total body edutainment platform that uses animation and multi-sensory instruction to help elementary students stay engaged, focused, and attentive. The platform provides great tools for children to communicate with other children, their parents, and teachers while growing, excelling, and succeeding inside and outside of the classroom.

In 2020-21, My Learning Buddy, Inc. educational system released a social-emotional edutainment curriculum that provides life instructional skills for success and a STEM edutainment curriculum that uniquely incorporates animation with a new and informative method of learning the innovation field of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). These curricula also integrate a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavioral needs.

My vision for My Learning Buddy is to make learning educational and entertaining across a multitude of topics. By having an extensive engineering background in STEM, I have seen and experienced firsthand the need to help increase the number of people of color in STEM and accepted the challenge to further influence the field of STEM, especially for underrepresented and underserved populations.

I am the President and Board Chair of the Milton Pitts Crenshaw Aviation Training Academy (MPCATA), an organization named in honor of the late Original Tuskegee Airman, Milton Pitts Crenshaw, and whose mission is to provide young people opportunities to pursue careers in aviation and the aerospace industry. Concurrently, I serve as a Board Member and the Technical Executive Officer for the Arkansas Mentoring and Networking Association, Inc. (AMNA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting opportunities for historically underrepresented STEM students in Arkansas, including opportunities to gain valuable access to STEM scholarships, internships, mentors, and careers.

Through these various STEM initiatives, my board and team of volunteers were able to help more than 100 students pursue interests and careers in STEM. My STEM achievements were further recognized when I became the first recipient of the “Outstanding STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) Leadership Award” presented by the Area Development Director of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) on behalf of the South Metro Atlanta Tuskegee Alumni Club (SMATAC) during their inaugural “Signature Scholarship Gala.”

As we move through 2021, what is your hope for the future?

I look forward to continuing the impact that my husband, team, supporters, and I have made through our numerous health advocacy initiatives and programs. My motto in life stems from Ralph Waldo Emerson's quote, which in essence says, that if I can't move beyond that which I have already mastered, then I will never grow.

My hope for the future is to be better, stronger, wiser, and healthier so that I can continue making a valuable influence and immeasurable contribution for many years to come!

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www.mywaterbuddy.com