Pediatrician Bernie Putter (MD ’59) saw salt-like spots on the patient’s cheek, confirming what a younger physician suspected but hadn’t witnessed before—measles. “You see it once, you’ll never forget,” says Putter of the telltale Koplik spots. Putter was practicing in Port St. Lucie, Florida, in 2015 when he helped diagnose the state’s first locally acquired measles case in some time. By working in Florida after practicing on Long Island for 36 years, Putter says he was following advice from his late mentor Paul Caplan (see obituary, Fall 2020), who told Putter over one of their supper breaks in the St. Margaret cafeteria to practice medicine where he wanted to live.

Wayne Teris (MD ’79) is chief medical officer of Care Compass Network (CCN), a nonprofit organization in Binghamton, New York. Originally funded by New York Medicaid, CCN connects hospital systems, nursing homes, social service agencies and higher education systems to “improve the health and well-being of community members,” Teris says. In March 2020, he helped establish CCN’s COVID-19 Telehealth Assistance Program, allowing social care organizations, behavioral health providers, substance-use disorder providers and private primary care practices in the network to deliver care safely during the pandemic. “Most of our partners,” says Teris, “indicated that this program was critical to their survival during lockdown.”

Antonio Hardan (Psychiatry Fellow ’96) is professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University, where he also directs the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Clinic and the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Hardan’s autism research uses neuroimaging and biologic markers to assess “who benefits most from a specific intervention,” he says. He’s also researching the efficacy of parental intervention: “There are not enough resources out there to deliver treatment,” Hardan notes. So “one approach we’ve been examining is training parents to help their children learn new skills,” allowing them to deliver crucial interventions at home when professionals may not be available.

Kamal Khanna (PhD ’04) is associate professor of microbiology at New York University. His research focuses on understanding how the immune system, via a close study of macrophages, responds to respiratory infections; that research focus narrowed last spring. “Once the pandemic hit,” Khanna says, “half my lab switched to studying SARS-CoV-2.”

Just prior to the pandemic, Khanna says, his lab discovered a macrophage responsible for “rewiring things back down” in response to infection-related inflammation. These findings were featured in the March 2020 issue of Science Immunology.

When Natalie Gentile (MD ’14) and Kirsten Lin (MD ’06, Family Medicine Resident ’09)—both independent-practice physicians in the Pittsburgh area unaffiliated with a large health system—first learned how the COVID-19 vaccine would be distributed, they recognized immediately the disparate access that their fellow unaffiliated providers would face. “We had a need and recognized that need in others,” Gentile says, “so we created the opportunity for us all to get taken care of.” After registering with Pennsylvania’s Department of Health as a provider and smoothing some bumps in the road—like delayed shipments and logistical hurdles—their clinic has vaccinated more than 1,000 frontline workers. It’s largely staffed by volunteers, including Pitt Med students.

Robert Tomko (PhD ’08) is assistant professor of biomedical sciences at Florida State University, where he received the University Teaching Award in 2019. Tomko’s lab currently researches the 26S proteasome: “a protein recycling center inside our cells,” he says, “that breaks down damaged, defective or otherwise unneeded proteins into building blocks that can be used to make new proteins.” Tomko aims to “reverse engineer” the proteasome in order to understand its functional mechanisms more intimately. “These advances,” he says, “will help us to discover new and interesting chemicals that could potentially be developed into drugs” for proteasome-dysfunction-linked cancers and neurodegenerative disorders.
SPOTLIGHT

STUART KAPLAN: RELIEF AND RENEWAL

Getting a tattoo is typically a choice. Perhaps it’s a memory of someone’s best day or a reminder of strength after their worst. For victims of sex trafficking, tattoos—a form of branding by their pimps—are scars of abuse.

Stuart Kaplan (Res ’84) strives to give victims a physically clean slate by removing their brandings. For three decades, Kaplan, a clinical assistant professor of medicine and dermatology at the UCLA Geffen School of Medicine, has volunteered with Children of the Night, a nonprofit that helps sexually exploited children. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the average age of child sex-trafficking victims is 15. “These girls have the emotional scars,” Kaplan says, “and then they have physical manifestations of these scars.”

Kaplan sees up to four Children of the Night patients per week. Each tattoo can take up to 10 treatments to remove, depending on the color, amount of ink and whether the tattoo was done professionally. The protocol is to use a laser to gradually break the ink particles into smaller pieces until they can be absorbed by the body’s white blood cells.

Even receiving the initial numbing injection can be traumatic for victims who were branded. “It’s almost reliving the experience they had before,” Kaplan explains. He has removed pimps’ names from places as intimate as patients’ genitalia and the insides of their lips. Sometimes patients cry, not always from physical pain, but out of emotional relief.

Kaplan, who has a private practice in Beverly Hills and is founder and CEO of KAPLAN MD Skincare, was drawn to dermatology to help people feel better about themselves. “The skin is the window to the rest of the body,” he says. Kaplan has diagnosed brain tumors, thyroid conditions and metabolic problems, all by observing patients’ skin. Of his work with Children of the Night, he says: “I will remove the tattoo no matter how difficult it is. I want to show these girls that there are good people out there, because they have not seen the best side of humanity.” —Samantha Paige Rosen
ROBERT E. LEE
OCT. 11, 1930—OCT. 29, 2020

Robert E. Lee (MD ’56) was a born-and-raised Pittsburger who attended Pitt both as an undergraduate and medical student. His 40-year career as a Pitt Med pathologist, begun in 1962, centered on the study of Gaucher’s disease. Lee published more than 60 articles on the subject—including after he retired in 2001.

There’s a new plaque in the main corridor of UPMC Presbyterian Department of Pathology honoring Lee, who graced its hallways long after his retirement to chat with his former mentees and colleagues. “He’d come to my office about once every couple of months,” recalls George Michalopoulos, chair of Pitt’s Department of Pathology. “It was always such a pleasure to see him.”

Lee—who served as historian for Pitt’s Medical Alumni Association—died in October at age 90. He’s remembered by his colleagues for his warmth and avuncular humor. “He was always smiling,” Michalopoulos says. “At the end of each sentence, he was always smiling.”

Lee served as UPMC Presbyterian’s chief of pathology as well as its vice chair for clinical affairs and director of laboratories. Many of his mentees, says Michalopoulos, “have evolved to become major faculty directors” themselves. For his outstanding service to the University, Lee was recognized with the Philip S. Hench Award as Distinguished Alumnus of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Lee died on his 54th wedding anniversary with his wife, Kathleen, at his bedside.

—Rachel Mennies

ABRAHAM TWEKISKI
OCT. 6, 1930—JAN. 31, 2021

People often stopped Abraham Twerski on the streets of Pittsburgh to express their gratitude. A rabbi and world-renowned psychiatrist, Twerski founded Gateway Rehabilitation Center in 1972, at a time when treatment centers weren’t widely available and people with alcoholism were often sent to jail.

Beyond reducing the stigma of treatment, Twerski’s success “advanced the idea that people can actually recover,” says Pitt psychiatry professor David Brent.

Twerski, a descendant of grand rabbis, witnessed the counseling his father offered to his congregation in Milwaukee. The younger Twerski noticed that people were starting to reach out to medical professionals for counseling as well, so he became a doctor.

Twerski completed his residency at what is now UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital and served as clinical director of psychiatry at St. Francis Hospital for 20 years. His experience supporting one patient’s recovery inspired him to create much-needed drug and alcohol addiction treatment options. Gateway now treats more than 1,000 people each day at 17 locations.

Twerski lectured globally, and he wrote more than 90 books on topics like self-esteem, addiction, spirituality and stress. He collaborated with “Peanuts” creator Charles Schulz on a guide to Alcoholics Anonymous’ 12 steps, “Waking up Just in Time.” Twerski was one of the first Orthodox leaders to write about domestic violence in that community.

He also wrote an advice column in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and co-created a program for boys from Orthodox Jewish homes struggling with addiction-related problems.

“He was a medical giant in terms of his contributions locally and nationally,” says Loren Welty, a former nurse at the hospital. “Once COVID started, he said, ‘Boy, I wish I were younger. This would be really interesting,’” says fellow physician John Finley.

Trish O’Gorman, another longtime friend and former nursing director at Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center, recalls that Davidson would come into the health center on Saturdays to work part-time.

“I found him very easy to work with because he was very good to patients,” O’Gorman says. “Very patient, very nonjudgmental.”

Davidson, whose grandparents died during the 1918 flu pandemic, sparking his interest in infectious diseases, died of COVID-19 in November 2020.

—Sarah Sager

IN MEMORIAM

40s
ALBERT M. BENSOFF
MD ’48
DEC. 17, 2020
STANLEY H. LEVY
MD ’49
DEC. 17, 2020

50s
GEORGE W. ROARK
MD ’50
JAN. 19, 2021
JOANNE K. ROBINSON
MD ’50
DEC. 11, 2020
LELAND S. BLOUGH SR.
MD ’51
FEB. 14, 2021
ALBERT C. CASABONA
MD ’51
MAY 6, 2020
RICHARD M. MANN
MD ’51, RES ’52, ’55
JAN. 17, 2021
WILLIAM F. SCHWERIN JR.
MD ’52
NOV. 19, 2020

DONALD J. FURMAN
MD ’54, RES ’55, ’61
DEC. 22, 2020
JOHN RELTON TARR
MD ’54
DEC. 10, 2020
JOHN L. HARRINGTON
MD ’55
FEB. 3, 2021
FRANCIS B. KENNEDY
MD ’55
DEC. 4, 2020
DONALD J. HUBER
MD ’56
JAN. 2, 2021
JOSEPH S. KARCHER
MD ’56
DEC. 12, 2020
HERMAN FELDER
MD ’58, RES ’62
FEB. 20, 2021
CONSTANTINE L. HAMPERS
MD ’58
JAN. 30, 2021
DAVID R. HAIZLETT
MD ’58
FEB. 9, 2021

40s
ALAN N. BRESS
MD ’59
JAN. 31, 2021
DANIEL D. NIXON
MD ’59
JAN. 18, 2021

60s
RAYMOND L. COSS JR.
MD ’60
JAN. 22, 2021
WILLARD A. BREDENBERG
MD ’61
JAN. 30, 2021
JACQUELYN S. CHALLENER
MD ’61
DEC. 25, 2020
HERBERT B. BERKOWITZ
MD ’61
MAR. 28, 2021
RICHARD U. ALERRE
RES ’63
JAN. 25, 2021
GORDON A. GRESS
MD ’63
JAN. 6, 2021
Deborah Gentile: Helps Kids Living Downwind

BY SHARON TREGASKIS

Deborah Gentile (MD ’94) was an associate professor of pediatrics at Drexel University in 2010 when she signed on as a clinician at a series of “asthma camps” for families living in medically underserved Pittsburgh neighborhoods. The events combined screening and patient education with hands-on sports drills led by professional and college athletes.

Gentile was skeptical when school nurses at the camps told her that, in their schools, nearly half of the students—five times the national average—used rescue inhalers. Then the pediatric allergist and her colleagues started crunching numbers. Some 20% to 30% of camp participants had an asthma diagnosis or met the screening criteria. Yet fewer than 50% of the children who needed care had the prescriptions or the know-how to prevent asthma attacks.

A chronic inflammatory condition, asthma makes the lungs hypersensitive, triggering severe airway inflammation, coughing, even suffocation in response to irritants like respiratory infection or secondhand smoke. Over the long haul, uncontrolled asthma impedes sleep, school attendance and extracurricular participation.

With the right meds, however, families can keep symptoms in check. “There are so many things we can do to help children with asthma live healthy, productive lives,” says Gentile, who has spent the past decade analyzing asthma rates among Pittsburgh-area kids living downwind from power, steel and coke-production plants.

Asthma is a “disease of disparities,” says Gentile. Neither the risks of developing asthma nor access to the screening and treatment that control it accrue proportionally. Air quality is worse in poorer neighborhoods, and poverty exacerbates exposure’s effect: The hours-long commute via public transit to an affordable provider can put treatment beyond reach, and because of Pennsylvania’s low reimbursement rates, few private allergists accept public insurance.

Gentile was funded by the Heinz Endowments in 2012 to run elementary school–based asthma clinics. Fifteen schools hosted the free screening events; the vast majority were near major Mon Valley polluters. In November 2020, the Journal of Asthma published Gentile’s latest analysis of data from those screening clinics, on the role of outdoor air pollution on asthma prevalence and control. Of the 1,202 children Gentile and her colleagues screened, 22.5% had asthma. Black children fared worst: 26.8% had asthma.

While the investigators statistically accounted for factors like race, socioeconomic status and exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke, they were unable to achieve the gold standard of experimental study design—inclusion of a control group. They simply couldn’t find an elementary school distant from the smokestacks at which students matched the participants’ racial and socioeconomic demographics. “It’s an environmental justice issue,” says Gentile. “The kids who live nearest to these sites are poor and African American. Their families lack the means to move away.”

Clairton’s residents live in the shadow of North America’s largest coke facility. After a plant fire there in December 2018, Gentile documented a rise in asthma diagnoses and exacerbation of symptoms among adults. She subsequently testified before the Pennsylvania Senate to advocate for stricter emissions controls. In 2019, she received the Michelle Madoff Award of Environmental Excellence from Pittsburgh’s Group Against Smog and Pollution. That same year, she established the nonprofit Community Partners in Asthma Care to formalize her ongoing efforts.

The nonprofit’s first venture—a dedicated asthma clinic, headed by Gentile—features a partnership with a federally qualified health center (FQHC) in Clairton. “We did the math,” says Gentile, who hopes to prove that when delivered through an FQHC, high-quality asthma care can be accessible for patients and affordable for providers. “This model could generate revenue for the community health center so we could train an asthma navigator, bring in health educators.” At the clinic ribbon cutting in November 2020, Gentile wielded the outsized ceremonial scissors.