



As Pressure Intensifies, Odessa Brown's Family Speaks Out

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The year 2020 ended with an explosive revelation, news that sent shockwaves through the community.

On December 31st, 2020, Crosscut.com published an article detailing the resignation of Dr. Ben Danielson, the esteemed Medical Director of Odessa Brown Childrens Clinic, citing the racist conduct of Seattle Childrens Hospital and its leadership as his reason for leaving.

While many current and former Odessa Brown patients have flocked to social media to share their dismay about Dr. Danielson's departure and outrage over the allegations that pushed him to step down, Odessa Browns family has also felt the emotional impact of the news.

I know she would be very disappointed to see whats going on with Childrens Hospital, reflected Browns granddaughter, Karimu Easter, 39. I was really disappointed to hear that. Because were in 2021 now, and to still be having these issues that effect peoples livelihood, as far as whether they live or die because when you have discrimination in the medical field, we dont know all the different ways thats impacting those patients.

Odessa Browns daughter, Cecilia Brown, 65, also feels the emotional toll. Its sad, its illegal, and it shouldnt be going on. People that were involved in it dont need to be there, she emphasized. Thats why she was interested in doing something in the Black community, anyway, to fight against this type of racism.

Odessa Browns story is a source of family pride and one that is shared and celebrated among all of her descendants. As they tell it, the seeds were planted for the Central Area clinic back in her hometown of Little Rock, Arkansas.

She knew what it was like to be denied medical care because of her race. She knew what that felt like; she almost died because of that, explained her daughter. In the midst of a medical emergency involving excessive bleeding, no hospital would take her because she was Black, Cecilia recalls. She had to be transported a great distance to find a medical facility that would accept Black citizens.

After relocating to Seattles Central District via Chicago in 1965, Odessa Brown noticed right off [that] there were not medical facilities in the community. She saw that there were children in need, but there was no health clinic close enough to

service them, Cecilia explains.

While working as a social worker for the Central Area Motivation Program (CAMP), Odessa Brown organized to create a medical facility that included services needed in the majority Black neighborhood, including sickle cell anemia treatment and high-quality dental care.

As a teenager, Cecilia remembers her mothers spirit and activism during her time in the Central District, a neighborhood with a multitude of Black shops, grocery stores, a bank and many other businesses. She was very outgoing and she reached out to not only the Black community within Seattle to provide the support the clinic would need. She was proud of who she was. She was proud to be Black and she was proud of the children in the community. She wanted them to have the best in their lives, starting off as young as possible to get the appropriate health care that they needed.

Odessa Brown died before her vision came to life after a quiet battle with leukemia. The clinic opened 6 months later in 1970. Her name and legacy have lived on in the childrens clinic, which has served generations of Black and low-income families in the Central District during its 50 years in operation.

Dr. Ben Danielson has been the Senior Medical Director for the last 21 years of Odessa Brown Childrens Clinics existence and is regarded by Browns descendants as someone who has been committed to her vision.

Karimu Easter finds it particularly disheartening. For someone who has been laboring for so long for the clinic and the passion that he has demonstrated in carrying on the legacy that my grandmother created, for him to step down really shows that the problem is really severe, she laments. Most of us deal with all kinds of racism on a regular basis in the workplace, macro-aggressions, micro-aggressions, and we have to continue moving forward regardless. So when it gets to the point when someone has said 'enough is enough' after 20 years, that means its really bad.

Dr. Danielson detailed specific issues including the recent departure of two colleagues, one fired under mysterious circumstances and the other allegedly forced to resign, both of them people of color, while revealing that he has been the target of racist slurs made by an unnamed current Seattle Children's senior administrator.

He also outlined concerns about excessive use of security directed against patients of color and underfunding of safety resources at the clinic in response to COVID-19. In his interview with Crosscut.com, Dr. Danielson explained that he felt marginalized and alone as a rare Black voice in a position of authority and that the clinic was put on a pedestal to raise money, but [they] would not show that same level of interest when it came to daily care.

The gravity of the allegations is something that Browns daughter and granddaughter take very seriously and they are expecting an equally serious response. An independent investigation needs to be conducted where people feel free to be interviewed, where they can get it out in the open without feeling like they may be mistreated or even fired, Cecelia Brown stressed.

Karimu believes that the community should also request that either Dr. Ben, if hes

willing, be given his position back, and if not, then he should definitely be involved in choosing who his replacement is. We need to make sure that the person who takes over has the same level of compassion and passion for the work that the Odessa Brown Clinic does and its importance in the community.

Prominent donors to Seattle Childrens Hospital including Marilyn and Lenny Wilkins, Micki and Robert Flowers, and Wanda Herndon have joined others in writing a letter calling for an independent legal investigation of Dr. Danielson's accusations and demanding a virtual meeting with the hospitals CEO to discuss how their concerns will be addressed.

Seattle community members have also made their voices heard at a recent Rally for Black Health Equity across from the Seattle Childrens Hospital's main campus and plan to route the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day march past Odessa Brown Clinic to address the concerns raised by Dr. Danielson in a public forum.

For Karimu, the issues made public by Dr. Danielson's resignation have demonstrated the real necessity for community-based propriety and leadership in order to provide effective and trustworthy services. The community also needs to fight for reparations, she adds, because we need to be able to have our own institutions and not be relying on other people to give us quality care, which would require money to do that. That money is a debt that is owed and it needs to be paid.

In the meantime, the spirit of Odessa Browns commitment to building institutions in the Central District has remained alive and well. Community-based organizations such as the African American Health Board, Nile's Edge, African Americans Reach and Teach Health, People of Color Against AIDS Network, and the Tubman Center for Health & Freedom have made the wellness of the community their priority.

In January of 2020, the Africatown Community Health Initiative launched with a summit of 50 Black healthcare and wellness professionals, who brought their collective knowledge and resources together to envision a healthier Black community. The group has continued to meet monthly and is in the planning stages of an outreach model to connect Black Seattleites with local services.

Dr. Danielson himself has been an active supporter of the Africatown Center for Education and Innovation as a regular keynote speaker for the annual Doctor for a Day Program, established in partnership with the University of Washington in 2013.

All of my family is involved one way or another in the healthcare field or social work, says Cecilia. All of [Odessas] children and grandchildren have been involved in the community in some way and have aligned themselves with helping children. I became a social worker myself, explains Cecilia, who works as a Childcare and Family Advocate for battered women, providing trauma services and relocation assistance. Her son is a recent law school graduate and early-career civil rights attorney.

Karimu, a Health and Wellness Coach, provides education to her clients to give them more control over their health and empower them to engage in an active lifestyle.

As her family remains committed to Odessa Browns legacy, they want to ensure that her efforts in Seattle were not made in vain. For my family, Karimu emphasizes, thats something that is really important, to not have people stepping on that legacy

and just using it to gain profits, but not deliver to the community that she was laboring for.

As Seattle Childrens Hospital moves forward in reckoning with its shortcomings, it will be the Seattle community and Odessa Browns descendants that will be watching to make sure their efforts live up to the standards worthy of her name.

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