

Powerful Collaboration

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Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center collaborates with patient and community stakeholders in a bidirectional manner on research, cancer control efforts and quality care.

The Community Advisory Board plays a key role in that mission by helping investigators design initiatives that have the appropriate outreach and engagement. One of the initiatives is the Southern Environmental Health Study. It aims to better understand how exposure to different chemicals might affect the likelihood of developing cancers or other diseases. The study, which is being conducted in 17 states and the District of Columbia, is enrolling adults between the ages of 40 and 70.

Candace Wong, an educator from the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas, became a member of the Southern Environmental Health Study Community Advisory Board to help with the study.

“My background is in biology,” Wong said. “Science is one of those very underestimated aspects of our daily lives that we don’t realize affects us in general, especially in the South. Cancer and heart disease are two things that catch all of us, I think, either personally or within our families.

“I’ve always been interested in possible causes from the environment, what we’re exposed to and how it affects our bodies. This was the perfect opportunity to explore that and see how it affects us within our communities as well as others throughout the United States.”

She said she plans to use her communication skills as an educator and her relatability as someone who grew up in the Mississippi Delta to help inform study participants. The study is a long-term cohort investigation, which will last at least 10 to 20 years. After enrollment and an initial questionnaire, up to twice a year participants may be asked follow-up questions about their health. The questionnaires should take about 30 minutes to complete. Some participants may be asked to give saliva, urine or blood samples, but this is an optional decision. People can opt out of that and remain in the study.

“It is my hope to provide the necessary resources and information for our community to understand the significance of what this study represents for future generations,” Wong said.

Cancer is already a generational experience for her.

“Within the past two years, my mother and I have become breast cancer patients,” she said. “I finished going through treatment this spring. My mother’s is underway. We have been greatly impacted.”

Her interest in the Southern Environmental Health Study led to her serving on the Community Advisory Board.

“I saw an online advertisement for the study,” Wong said. “I just called the number, and I was put in touch with someone. I explained how much I wanted to be a part of the study and help in any way that I could to gather information, as well as to better understand the factors we experience that can contribute to cancer in our area. Eventually, I was presented with the opportunity to be a part of the Community Advisory Board. It has been a wonderful opportunity that has opened a lot of new friendships and opportunities to speak with other people in science and research.”