

## Spreading the Word on Epidemiologic Research

**JABAR AKBAR** LOVES RESEARCH, considers himself a “people person,” and is dedicated to promoting health in underserved minority communities. After exploring several career options in search of one in which he could use skills in

both science and communication to address critical health needs among people of color, he settled on one he considers ideal. The first-year UCLA School of Public Health student is now on a path to a Ph.D. in epidemiology, with plans to remain in academia as an epidemiologist focusing on community-based public health nutrition – particularly the role of diet in cancer.

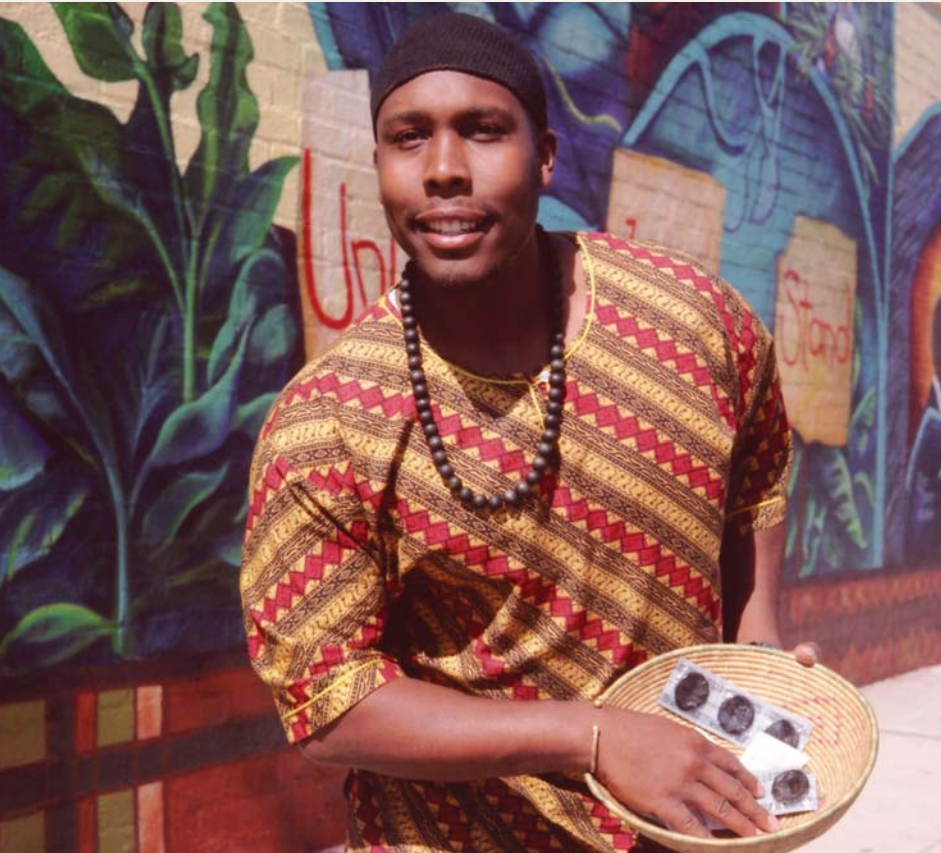
The choice crystallized for Akbar after his father suffered a fatal heart attack in 2001. “On my dad’s side of the family, most of the men do not live past the age of 60,” says Akbar, who is African American. “Heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and physical inactivity are all particular problems in the black community.” By that time, Akbar had received his M.P.H from the University of Michigan and was working as a research assistant at the University of North Carolina, helping to implement a pilot study of the role of diet in prostate cancer among African Americans. “I made a pact with myself after my father passed away that I would pursue a Ph.D. at UCLA, and that my research would address health disparities among certain ethnic and racial minority groups,” he says.

He entered the school’s M.S. program and already has become involved in community-based work. Akbar has served as coordinator of an initiative by the Diabetic Amputation Prevention Foundation to collect health-risk data among attendees of the annual Los Angeles African Marketplace and Cultural

Faire. He designed, implemented and analyzed results of a cross-sectional survey that garnered 1,147 responses – three-fourths of them from self-identified African Americans – at last year’s fair, and will follow up at this year’s event in an effort to obtain more comprehensive data on risk factors in the community.

Through this and future epidemiologic studies, Akbar hopes not only to provide important health-related data on underserved communities, but also to assist the affected communities in understanding and disseminating the results and in developing programs designed to reduce such risk factors. “In the past, too many researchers have gone into communities of color, collected their results and left, never to be heard from again,” he says. “What is much more needed, and respectful, is for researchers to share their results.” Akbar notes that there are many ways to do that – at town halls, in meetings with community leaders and politicians, and through articles or service announcements in the local media, to name a few. He sees a role for himself as a liaison between academia and the community, helping to translate epidemiologic research so that it can be better put to use.

“People would be surprised at how little many individuals in communities of color know about health disparities and how they fit into the picture – how their current lifestyles are setting them up for a higher risk of developing chronic disease,” Akbar says. “We need as many individuals from different backgrounds to pursue careers as public health professionals as possible – people who will return to their communities to make a difference.”



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