

# GIVING

THE METROHEALTH FOUNDATION | WINTER/SPRING 2025



## Made for the Mission

**"I'd like to be known as the CEO who really focused us on the importance of patients and the importance of our collective community."**

**—Christine Alexander-Rager, MD**



### What's inside?

Dr. Alexander and more MetroHealth caregivers share their inspirations to serve.



**TO OUR SUPPORTERS:**

While the two of us were on a recent call together, we did a little math and realized something stunning: We have been at MetroHealth for nearly 80 years between us.

What we found even more humbling? Our careers here are still only a very small piece of MetroHealth’s legacy in Cleveland. There is something special about this community. MetroHealth has hundreds of dedicated employees – lifers – those who come to MetroHealth and stay for their careers.

There is tremendous pride that comes with dedication to serving Greater Cleveland through MetroHealth. Not just because of the life-changing care offered to thousands every year, but the honor and joy of being around a community of individuals devoted to MetroHealth’s unique mission to care for everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.

When you support MetroHealth, you become part of this community, strengthening our commitment to the mission and improving health access for Clevelanders. In this issue of GIVING, we are thrilled to share a few stories from our caregiving community. As ever, we are deeply appreciative of your support.

In gratitude,

**Alfred F. Connors, Jr., MD**  
Chair, The MetroHealth Foundation  
Board of Directors

**Kate Brown**  
President, The MetroHealth Foundation

“*Since the day I arrived at MetroHealth in June 1974, I have been proud to serve our mission. The beauty of MetroHealth is that everyone who works here understands the mission and understands how what they do serves that mission. It is why we work together so well.*”

–Alfred F. Connors, Jr., MD

“*MetroHealth has been an important part of my family for years, from the 1930s, when my grandmother worked in our laundry, to the 1980s, when my aunt received life-changing stroke care in our Rehabilitation Institute.*

*Now, I have the honor of sharing and engaging our supporters in the story of MetroHealth and its extraordinary mission.*”

–Kate Brown

## BOARD NEWS



**Jonathan Pressnell** has been elected to serve as the board's next chair. He will hold the title of Chair-Elect until the end of Dr. Connors' term in May 2025.

## The MetroHealth Foundation Board of Directors welcomes two new members:



**Chris Hess, Director**  
*Vice President of Public Affairs, Eaton Corporation*



**David Stepnick, MD, Ex Officio**  
*Interim Executive Vice President, Chief Physician Executive & Clinical Officer, The MetroHealth System*

# Chairman's Leadership Award: Collin Knisely



At the December 2024 Foundation board meeting, Chair Alfred F. Connors, Jr., MD, presented the Chairman's Leadership Award to Collin Knisely, a Life Member of the board. He's served the board for 36 years, more than half of the entire Foundation's history.

Collin has been an advocate for the MetroHealth mission since day one, and over the years he has generously connected several of his friends and colleagues with the Foundation and MetroHealth. He has been a trusted advisor to board members and staff, and he still regularly volunteers his time to attend tours, fundraisers and MetroHealth events. Congratulations and thanks to Collin for his generosity, service, commitment to our mission and passion for the people we serve.

## THE METROHEALTH FOUNDATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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# Made for the Mission

**WHEN YOU GIVE TO METROHEALTH, YOU GIVE  
IN SUPPORT OF HIGH-QUALITY, LIFE-CHANGING  
CARE FOR EVERYONE.**

You have heard stories of our incredible patients, individuals whose perseverance inspires hope every day.

Today, we are highlighting the MetroHealth staff members who make that perseverance and hope possible.

**Who** work the third shift to be there for our most vulnerable patients.

**Who** sit with them through screenings and offer a warm smile or supportive touch.

**Who** have found connection, purpose and passion in caring.

**THEY** are made for this mission.



## MEET

# Irina Tvardovskaya



Irina and her husband, Bodhen, arrived in Cleveland in 1995 as Ukrainian refugees with an infant and little more than what they were able to pack. With no English skills or health insurance, Irina and Bodhen panicked when their daughter, Julia, started running a high fever. Irina rushed Julia to MetroHealth, where she was able to work directly with an interpreter to speak with Julia's provider.

Julia had had an ear infection. With a prescription for antibiotics, she made a full recovery.

Irina said the experience with the interpreter helped her see what was possible if she could speak English.

Irina soon enrolled in a two-year English as a Second Language program at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C). When Irina had a firm grasp on the language, she left a grueling house-cleaning job to become an interpreter at MetroHealth. She loved the stability, place and purpose the job provided – but still, she wanted to do more.

Inspired by providers she saw every day, Irina was intrigued by the idea of radiology school. Her supervisor informed her that MetroHealth would pay for her schooling if she managed to work full-time while earning good grades. Together, they worked up a manageable plan that allowed Irina to enroll in

classes during the day and work as an interpreter on second shift and weekends.

In 1999, Irina returned to Tri-C to begin her radiology program. By July of 2001, with just one month to go before officially completing her program, MetroHealth's Radiology team encouraged her to apply for an open position.

Irina got the job as an X-Ray Technologist in 2001 and hasn't looked back. She now works as a Lead Radiology Technologist and helps manage a crew of five other caregivers. She's stayed with MetroHealth because of how much she enjoys her colleagues.

Irina's desire to learn and grow professionally has not wavered. She's only three classes away from earning a Master's degree – a degree made possible through MetroHealth's tuition reimbursement plan.

**Irina has now lived in the United States for 29 years. In 2024, she celebrated her 25th anniversary of working at MetroHealth.**

What's not lost on Irina is how much help she's gotten along the way to be where she is today.



***"All my life I've had people helping me out. And now I'm paying it back."***

## MEET

# Ralph Sonner



For more than 10 years, Ralph Sonner has worked at MetroHealth as Logistics Supervisor. At Main Campus most days by 4:30 a.m., he oversees a team of three dispatchers, 14 drivers and three mail clerks responsible for scheduling and transporting patients to their appointments.

For the past few years, he's also been a fixture in the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) Clinic – as a patient and resource for others facing laryngeal cancer. Not only does he provide emotional support, he also is an example of someone who didn't let cancer stop him in his tracks.

Diagnosed with stage 2 laryngeal cancer in 2017, Ralph underwent weeks of radiation, then a total laryngectomy – the removal of the voice box and the permanent disconnection of the windpipe (trachea) from the nose, mouth and throat.

After more radiation, and following chemotherapy, Ralph got a tracheoesophageal voice prosthesis (TEP). The device creates a path for air to move from the lungs to the esophagus, with the sound of the air causing the top of the esophagus to vibrate the patient's new "voice."

A couple years ago, speech therapist Erin Nutt, MS, CCC-SLP, considered how her patients might benefit from talking to Ralph, known throughout the clinic for his laid-back personality and sense of humor. He stepped in to help right away, relating to patients with empathy and experience.

Ralph says he knows how overwhelming it is to listen to a speech therapist explain how a total laryngectomy will impact the voice, swallowing and breathing.

It's all about staying positive, moving forward, and embracing life, he says.

"A lot of times, patients are so afraid or in shock, they don't know what to expect," said Ralph, who has adjusted to life with a TEP and breathing from his neck instead of through his mouth and nose. "I go through everything and explain it to them. Right off the bat, I tell them, 'Don't let this affect you. Adapt to it and enjoy the rest of your life.'"

David Ludlow, MD, an ENT (Otolaryngology) specialist who performed Ralph's surgery, can recall at least a half dozen patients who were scared to move forward with the total laryngectomy surgery until meeting Ralph.

"The changes someone goes through with the surgery are very life-altering," says Dr. Ludlow. "To have somebody who's so functional like Ralph take the time and show that he can still talk, he can still swallow, he can still work ... it makes a huge difference."

Others in the ENT Clinic say Ralph excels at tailoring his message to patients based on where they are in the process and what they're able to handle. He has even conducted a few formal yet relaxed sessions for nurses who want to learn more about caring for laryngectomy patients.

"Ralph likes to give back," Dr. Ludlow says. "That's kind of his M.O., that's partly why he works at Metro. He likes to work hard, and he likes to help people."



## Our employees are not just excellent caregivers; they are generous too.

In 2024, employee giving at MetroHealth increased by 25 percent, with the largest portion of employee contributions going to the Employee Hardship Fund. Gifts to this fund aid employees experiencing a temporary financial hardship due to an emergency or catastrophic event. Through sustained payroll gifts, our caregivers extend their resources to one another in times of need.

To learn more about MetroHealth Employee Giving, contact Kellie Mayle, Philanthropy Officer: [kmayle@metrohealth.org](mailto:kmayle@metrohealth.org) or 440-592-1433.



## MEET

# Shawnese Gordon



From the first time Shawnese Gordon visited MetroHealth in her training as a Surgical Technologist, she knew this was where she wanted to work.

*"The whole culture affected me from the start," she said. "I felt more at home than I had anywhere else."*

In 2003, she finished her training and accepted a position as a Surgical Tech at MetroHealth right away.

After several years in surgery, she wanted to work more directly with patients and decided to pursue a nursing degree. In 2017, she began a new role at MetroHealth, this time as a Clinical Nurse.

Throughout the early part of her career, Shawnese had felt growing pressure at home. She was regularly subjected to emotional and verbal abuse from her partner, and the pressure built to a violent altercation that landed Shawnese in a hospital emergency room close to her home.

*"I remember feeling very alone," she said of her experience in the hospital. "There was no one there to ask how I felt. No one asked me if I had a safe place to stay. No one asked about my children." The cold, clinical environment made her feel more isolated.*

So when she began to study nursing, she knew she would provide a different type of care. She followed a path into Forensic Nursing, where she felt called to provide warm comfort and care to those who need it. She received her MSN in Forensic Nursing from Cleveland State University in 2019.

Now, Shawnese is a full-time Forensic Nurse at MetroHealth, where she cares for survivors of violence and abuse in their immediate, acute treatment as well as in their need for long-term support resources to address trauma and connect with the legal system. She is part of the SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) team and is a certified SANE Nurse, in both pediatric and adolescent/adult care.

*"I can be there for these patients—I have been in their shoes," she said. "I have been a pregnant teen. I have been scared like so many of them. I am here to help them feel like they are not alone."*

Her time at MetroHealth has been both nurturing and inspiring, she said. And she passes that support and compassion to the patients she cares for.

In a heartfelt gesture, Shawnese gives her patients each a bracelet with inspiring words: love, hope and strength. She wears similar bracelets herself, and she finds they help her remember to keep moving forward. She hopes her patients will feel cared for, and the bracelet is a reminder of that.

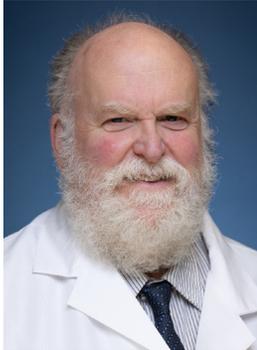
*"If I can put one smile on somebody's face, I did my job," she said.*

In 2023, Cleveland.com named Shawnese one of Northeast Ohio's 11 Top Nurses of the Year, an honor that she says made her feel especially validated in her work.

*"I work nights, so sometimes it feels like I'm more disconnected from a lot of the staff," she said. "This award told me that my work is not unnoticed. I like to think I'm a hidden gem."*

## MEET

# James W. Campbell, MD, MS



James W. Campbell, MD, MS, knew that care for the elderly would be his life's mission from the time he was in college, obtaining a degree in history. After medical school, he worked across several Cleveland hospital systems, completing his fellowship in Geriatric Medicine at University Hospitals and interning in Cleveland's very first geriatric clinic. Dr. Campbell joined MetroHealth full-time in the early 1990s.

Having served more than 30 years at MetroHealth, Dr. Campbell retired at the end of 2024. At the time he held the positions of Chair of the Department of Geriatrics, Director of Post-Acute Care and the MetroHealth Care Partners ACO, Medical Director at Jennings Center for Older Adults, and Professor of Family Medicine at Case Western Reserve University.

"People don't understand that old people are as diverse as any population," he said to *Greater Cleveland M.D. News*. "They talk about 'the needs of the elderly,' forgetting that these patients have had 75 years to individuate. Their needs are very diverse because they are all so unique."

During his career at MetroHealth, Dr. Campbell served as a compassionate but fierce champion of geriatric medicine. He chaired MetroHealth's Department of Family Medicine, revitalized the Geriatric Fellowship program, oversaw the building of the former Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Center for Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation, and led the Senior Health & Wellness Center—the first clinic in Cleveland to unite numerous medical specialties unique to older adults' health needs at one location.

"We believe that seniors deserve the best care available. We've created a place that is truly going to be a one-stop shop for all of their health and medical needs," he said.

In honor of Dr. Campbell's enduring legacy of geriatric care at MetroHealth, The MetroHealth Foundation created the James W. Campbell, MD, MS Endowment in Geriatric Medicine, which will serve as a tribute to his dedication to improving the health of older adults.

As of December 2024, several investments have been made to the endowment, demonstrating the resounding impact Dr. Campbell had on so many individuals and their families.

To learn more about the James W. Campbell, MD, MS Endowment in Geriatric Medicine, contact Greg Sanders, Vice President, Philanthropy: [gsanders@metrohealth.org](mailto:gsanders@metrohealth.org) or 440-592-1319.



## The Merriest Mission

Despite his lifelong dedication to older adults, Dr. Campbell shows up for MetroHealth's youngest patients every holiday season. His white beard and warm demeanor help him transform into Santa Claus to bring gifts and cheer to children and their families in the hospital.

## MEET

# Christine Alexander-Rager, MD



If medicine is a calling, MetroHealth President and CEO Christine Alexander-Rager, MD, has been on call for as long as she can remember.

*"I wanted to go to nursery school to be a nurse," she remembers, laughing.*

Uncle Lou, her father's brother and her godfather, was an OB-GYN, and when he came home every night to their large multi-generational home in Youngstown, he'd leave his black doctor's bag on a side table, right where his preschool nieces could find it.

At the age of 4 or 5, during a family dinner, young Chrissy proclaimed, "I want to be a doctor when I grow up!"

She remembers everyone giggling and laughing, except for her grandmother, a woman who'd never finished grade school and whose own dreams were denied because she'd been promised in marriage.

*"As we were clearing the table, my grandmother said to me, 'You just don't let anyone take your dreams. Those are yours and yours alone. Forget about people laughing at you.'*

*"What a life lesson for such a little girl."*

After finishing at Youngstown State University with a degree in biology, Dr. Alexander went on to graduate and medical school at The Ohio State University. She is a passionate Buckeyes fan.

Through a fellowship, she had spent a month working alongside residents at MetroHealth and said she was "flabbergasted" by the resources and support the hospital had to offer the community.

When the opportunity arose to come to MetroHealth full time in August 1997 as a family physician and Director of Obstetrical Education, it was an easy decision, she says.

*"As soon as I got here, I got so immersed in taking care of our patients and focusing on our community. I just fell in love with it."*

In the more than 27 years since, "Chrissy," as patients and colleagues affectionately call her, has cared for thousands of patients and their families; delivered hundreds of babies; and inspired and guided colleagues, residents and learners in progressively more advanced leadership roles.

Before becoming MetroHealth's President and CEO in 2024, Dr. Alexander served as Interim Chief Physician and Clinical Executive, charged with leading the health system's clinical enterprise. She took on that role after 14 years as Chair of Family Medicine. Besides caring for patients – her first love professionally – she founded MetroHealth's nationally recognized School Health Program, which partners with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and other school systems to bring in-school clinics, mobile units and other services to students and their families. She also sparked creation of MetroHealth's medical outreach to the homeless. And she served as President of MetroHealth's Medical Staff from February 2022 to February 2024.

*"She is somebody who embodies the mission," says Katie Davis Bellamy, who worked with Dr. Alexander for years leading the School Health Program. "In all of her actions and how she treats her patients, how she treats staff, how she treats community members, she really wants to make sure she puts the patient or the people at the center of everything she does."*

As MetroHealth's chief executive, Dr. Alexander is clear about her top priority.

*"I think I'd like to be known as the CEO who really focused us on the importance of patients and the importance of our collective community," she says. "That's really what it's all about, right? And that is why we're still here nearly 200 years, because we've been able to our focus on what's important."*



# Opening 2026: Outpatient Health Center

About a year from now, construction crews will be putting the finishing touches on the 300,000-square-foot Outpatient Health Center taking shape on Main Campus. We expect to see our first patients in this state-of-the-art facility in early 2026.

This \$224 million capital project is more than just a building – it’s a game changer for ambulatory services, campus redevelopment and the growth of The MetroHealth System.

“This is all about improving access for our patients,” said MetroHealth President and CEO Christine Alexander-Rager, MD. “It will be completely dedicated to clinical care.”

## Departments that will have clinical space in the building include:

- ✓ Radiation Oncology
- ✓ Breast Health Center
- ✓ Heart and Vascular
- ✓ Pulmonary and Sleep Medicine
- ✓ OB-GYN
- ✓ Pediatrics
- ✓ Occupational Therapy and more

The Outpatient Health Center will also include a drive-thru pharmacy that will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week – an especially important development given the number of pharmacy closures in the Clark-Fulton neighborhood and elsewhere on Cleveland’s near west side.

Through 2025, small tours of the new center will be held monthly. If you are interested in learning more or supporting any of our outpatient programs, please contact Greg Sanders, Vice President, Philanthropy: [gsanders@metrohealth.org](mailto:gsanders@metrohealth.org) or **440-592-1319**.

# With Gratitude for Recent Giving

## YOUR GENEROSITY CHANGES LIVES

The MetroHealth Foundation thanks its partners and supporters who have given major gifts in the last several months, including:

The **Samuel H. Miller Foundation** awarded a \$3 million grant to redesign and renovate the MetroHealth Emergency Department.

**Roots & Wings Foundation** has pledged \$1.95 million over three years in support of programs serving infants and young children, prenatal through age 3. Roots & Wings is a Seattle-based family foundation launched in 2020 by Judy Faulkner, founder and CEO of Epic.

**Health Assurance Foundation (HAF)** awarded \$434,400 to help develop and expand best practice standards for Community Health Workers. This initial collaboration between MetroHealth and HAF funds one year of work, with potential to continue into future years.

The foundation received a \$217,000 gift in support of the School Health Program.

**The PNC Foundation** awarded a \$50,000 grant to support the expansion of the Nurse Family Partnership program to include parents with multiple live births.

**Karen and Chip Chaikin** updated their major gift pledge for continued support of the Anita Chaikin Band Aid Fund, designed to assist eligible patients on a case-by-case basis with immediate basic needs (e.g., food, transportation, housing and other social services).

**Epic Corporation** provided a \$30,000 grant in support of the Institute for H.O.P.E.™

Full funding has been obtained toward year one of the Fred A. Lennon Charitable Trust challenge grant in support of Functional Electrical Stimulation research activities. The three-year challenge grant totals \$600,000, and recent gifts have been received from **Tim King, The Anschuetz-Higham Fund and the DiMarco Foundation Trust.**

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If you wish to not receive any communication supporting The MetroHealth System or The MetroHealth Foundation, please contact The MetroHealth System Office of Strategic Philanthropy by email at [mhdevelopment@metrohealth.org](mailto:mhdevelopment@metrohealth.org) or by phone at 800-325-5606, ext. 85665 (calling from Ohio) or 800-554-5251, ext. 85665 (calling from outside Ohio).

# Ways to Give



## PLANNED GIFT ANNUITIES

**Planned gifts allow you to achieve financial goals while creating a personal legacy. Consider giving to The MetroHealth Foundation (MHF) as part of your estate and long-term financial planning.**

**Please feel welcome to share this information with your professional advisor(s) for advice on options that work best for you.**

**Charitable Gift Annuity (CGA):** Enter into a charitable gift annuity contract with MHF that pays a set amount for one or two lives. This provides you with current and future savings on income taxes and gives you fixed payments for life.

**Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust (CRAT):** Secure a fixed income and supplement your retirement funds by creating a charitable trust that pays you a set income annually, with the remainder passing to MHF. This offers you fixed payments for life and an immediate income tax deduction.

To learn more about planned giving to The MetroHealth Foundation, contact Caleb Sturupp, Philanthropy Officer: [csturupp@metrohealth.org](mailto:csturupp@metrohealth.org) or **440-592-1434**.