

Code Talkers



**Genome readers honor genetic counselors
who interpret complexity with compassion.**

Made possible by



INVITAE



Finalist

Amie Blanco

Compassion in Her DNA

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Amie Blanco was born with an important calling: to save lives. She was born to be a genetic counselor. She is one of the few counselors who truly understands and appreciates individuals and families with hereditary colon cancer syndromes. Amie not only helped my family and me be properly diagnosed with Lynch syndrome (LS), but she also helped me to realize my life's purpose.

I have known Amie for almost a decade. She has been my genetic counselor as well as an advocate for my family and me. She has also been a mentor, a supervisor, and a friend.

I met Amie in 2007. I was 24 years old and on a mission to determine the cause of my family's pervasive cancer woes. At that point there had been nine cancer diagnoses among six members of my paternal family, including my father and my sister.

In 2002, at age 35, my sister was diagnosed with colon cancer. Her oncologist suggested our family may have LS and ordered a genetic test for both my father and sister. Unfortunately, these tests did not provide a definitive diagnosis. Although more cancers would follow, my family was never referred to genetic counseling or retested. When my aunt and her son were diagnosed with cancer, I referred myself to genetic counseling.

During my first counseling session with Amie, I found myself comforted and heard. She validated my family history and did not dismiss it, like other physicians. Amie simply got it and saved my

life. She empowered me with the information and tools needed to prevent and detect cancer early.

Although I was ready to be tested, she educated me about the genetic testing process. She told me that it was more informative to test a family member who had had cancer. She was certain that my family had a deletion in the MSH2 gene and that the test done in 2002 was unable to detect it. The next step was to retest my dad. He was in another city, but Amie was able to coordinate care with a genetic counselor near him.

Amie's efforts to diagnose my family inspired me to become an advocate for LS, my life's calling. After receiving my results, I shared with Amie that I wanted to take action and increase awareness. She has been there every step of the way. She helped to tell my story, invited me to speak with medical students, and supported me when I wanted to pursue a career in genetic counseling.

When I was not accepted into a program, she got my foot in the door as a genetic counseling assistant, and eventually I became her assistant. Under Amie's supervision, my admiration for her has grown even more. Now that I have embarked on a MBA/MPA degree with the goal of increasing accessibility to genetics care in underserved communities, Amie continues to be there.

Amie impacts the lives of all the patients she sees. I have seen Amie in action, counseling and fighting for patients with limited





resources. She counseled a family that received terrible medical care because of their socioeconomic and racial background. The family was screaming LS and yet their doctors did nothing to address it. Amie was furious on their behalf. But under her watch, this family received the care they deserved. She made them feel valued, as she once did for me.

She always has everyone's best interests in mind. Her expertise is continually sought after. She is able to break down a complicated case with all its moving pieces and get to the point quickly, while offering a sensible solution toward the best path forward.

With genetic tests becoming readily available to consumers, she acknowledges, "Anyone can spit in a tube and get results, but is that good care? Are we doing harm? We have to be thoughtful as precision medicine advances." Her exacting judgment, compassion, advocacy, and temperament are traits that set her apart and the reason she was chosen to lead UCSF's Cancer Genetics and Prevention Program into the 21st century of genetic medicine. It is clear that her wicked acumen, drive, and passion will continue to influence the field of hereditary cancer for generations to come.

Guiding patients through genetic decisions brings Amie great fulfillment. Helping patients is in her DNA. 🧬

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