

# Dr. Lisa Merritt



**I**magine struggling so hard to breathe that you can't sleep. When Lisa Merritt was growing up in New York, some nights were like that because of her severe asthma. Her family doctor's kind and helpful care sparked her interest in a medical career.

In her teens, Lisa's asthma eased up, and she leaped into gymnastics. Then she grew seven inches in one year! This changed her balance, so she moved on to track and field. She even started a girls' track team at school. When she wasn't working out, Lisa loved learning. She earned a bachelor's degree from Georgetown University and a medical degree from Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Lisa saw how often patients of color and non-English speakers got less respect and attention from doctors. She started the Multicultural Health Institute in 1995 to offer services and education. During the pandemic, the group fed thousands of people and fought for fair access to vaccines. Its volunteers also help with hurricane relief. Lisa and her daughter, Amara, live in Florida.

**Q: What's one of your favorite childhood memories?**

**A:** Spending my summers in Jamaica with my grandmother and my family . . . I had such a sense of freedom. I could climb coconut trees, pick fresh coconuts and mangoes and avocados . . . They taught me how to free dive and spearfish. I just would be in the water for hours.

**Q: What was the most challenging experience for you as a kid?**

**A:** My parents' divorce. I was 13 . . . There was a lot of tension [but] I was relieved because I didn't like seeing them fight. It made me very sad. How I dealt with it was I really got into athletics and . . . photography.



**Left:** When Lisa graduated from 9th grade at age 14, both of her grandmothers celebrated with her. **Right:** At age 15, Lisa loved exploring photography techniques, and she still enjoys the art.



**Q: What experience from your youth set you on the path to your career?**

**A:** I had pretty severe childhood asthma, and we had a family doctor . . . He used to make house calls . . . [He was] encouraging me and taking care of me. When his daughter and I would want to get together . . . I loved to go to her house and help with the chores, because that meant we were cleaning his office, which was in the basement of his house. [While] cleaning the office, [we were] playing with the [medical] stuff . . . I always had a fascination [with] what all was inside your body . . . I had family members who had health challenges, and I always wanted to know how I might be able to help them . . . I knew this by the time I was about 11 or 12.



Questions and  
Answers with an  
Inspirational Bahá'í



**Q: What does a physiatrist do? Why did you choose that specialty?**

**A:** What I love about it is it's a field that treats the entire person and life span. We deal with children . . . and the very old and the issues they have. And it's a combination of orthopedic medicine, which [looks at] bones, joints, and muscles, and neurology, which has to do with nerves and the nervous system, the brain, the spinal cord. . . I'm a traumatic brain injury specialist. [We're also] well versed in internal medicine, things that affect the heart, lungs, kidneys.

**Q: What is the Multicultural Health Institute and what inspired it?**

**A:** It is a not-for-profit that I conceived of [when] . . . I saw the effects of health disparities and inequities [for people of color] . . . I felt it was important that people be educated to understand their health conditions . . . We do outreach . . . sign people up for services, do screenings, teach them what to do.



**Top:** Lisa and Amara's strong bond has deepened as they learn to cope with Amara's rare form of cancer. "She's my hero," says Lisa. **Left:** The door of Lisa's office at the Multicultural Health Institute shows her love of art. **Right:** During the pandemic, Lisa and dedicated volunteers like this team at a community center in Palmetto, Florida, worked hard to provide COVID-19 prevention and treatment to underserved communities. Left to right: Lucinda Vega, Jo Oni Jones, Dr. Lisa Merritt, Odessa Ammons, and Joseph Carretta.

**Q: What should kids know about hurricanes and other disasters?**

**A:** When bad things happen, the good people, the helpers come . . . You have to walk in faith, and you have to believe in the possibility of good. Let's not give in to fear . . . There's strength in unity—helping your neighbors . . .

**Q: What can kids do to stay healthy in body, mind, and spirit?**

**A:** To stay healthy in the body, move it . . . Go outside and play, ride a bike, run, roller skate, do stuff . . . [For your] mind, cherish your friendships . . . don't engage in backbiting [and other] negative stuff . . . And with spirit, it's prayer . . . If you live in service of God . . . then your life is a prayer and it's beautiful . . .

**Q: What's your advice for kids who want to pursue a career in health care?**

**A:** Hold fast to your own dreams and seek those who will support you in achieving that. Study hard. Learn as much as you can . . . Talk to people in the field [and] visit them in their work . . . There are so many possibilities . . .

**Q: If you had one wish for *Brilliant Star's* readers, what would it be?**

**A:** For them to really understand their own power to bring about change . . . young people can change the world . . . Just become the best of whoever they are and work together in unity to make it better, to bring about peace . . .