# Alumna Profile

# Cora LeEthel Christian, MD '71, MPH
## Physician, Advocate and Policy-Maker in Paradise

As a high-school student, Cora Christian was certain she should follow in the footsteps of her father, an attorney and judge. But her father was convinced that his daughter, the youngest of six children, was destined for a career in science. "He knew I was too sensitive for law," she says. "Back then, part of the black experience was that the father made the decisions for the family."

Graduating first in her high-school class on Saint Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Christian entered college when she was 15 years old. She majored in chemistry to please her father and minored in speech to keep her options open for a career in law. After struggling in chemistry, she became a biology major and soon realized what her father knew all along: a career in science, specifically medicine, would allow her to combine her love of people with her newfound fascination with biology. Christian became the first woman from the U.S. Virgin Islands to become a physician. Soon, her aspiration for a career in law became a distant memory.

When Christian entered Jefferson at age 19, she was the second-youngest student in her class, one of eight women in her year and the only African-American enrolled at the time as a medical student. Prompted by her experience as a target of bigotry by a few small-minded classmates, Christian asked the administration to consider her idea for a program to attract more black medical student applicants.

"It was more about cultural competency and connecting with patients than it was about race," she says. "I wanted to see others get the educational opportunities I had; and I knew that they would make first-class clinicians." In her fourth year, thanks in part to her persistence and that astute suggestion, there were 12 black students in the first-year class.

Throughout her medical training, Christian made sure that whatever direction her education took, she would always be able to use her skills back home in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where she had friends and family, the benefits of being part of the United States and, of course, beautiful weather. Yet, with all of their advantages, the Virgin Islands were and still are rife with inefficiencies and population health issues like HIV, diabetes and heart disease. Armed with her Jefferson education, residency training in family medicine from Howard University and a Master of Public Health from Johns Hopkins, Christian returned to the Virgin Islands to help improve the health and health care of her people.

In addition to practicing family medicine and serving as the medical director for HOVENSA, an oil company, Christian is the medical director of the Virgin Islands Medical Institute Inc., which she founded in 1977 to provide advocacy and technical assistance and to help Medicare beneficiaries receive quality care. "I started it to help improve the quality of care for all residents, and it has done just that," she says.

Over the course of her career, Christian served as the assistant commissioner of the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health and as a member of the national AARP Board of Directors, which she counts among her proudest career accomplishments. Yet she has still found time to see patients. She credits Jefferson for her skills as a physician. "At Jefferson, I developed a fundamental understanding of how to make the right diagnosis," she says. "Treatments and technology are always changing. So knowing the right diagnosis is key, because illnesses will always remain the same."

Christian and her husband, an economist and professor at the University of the Virgin Islands, have a son and daughter, both of whom live on the Virgins Islands. Her son is following a career in business and banking. Fittingly, the course of her daughter's life has circled back to Christian's original ambition. Her daughter, who considered becoming a physician, is now an attorney. "I feel good about her career decision," says Christian. "She'll make a much better attorney than I ever would have." ∎