

# BEFORE YOU GO

## University Hospital Chair Tanya Freeman on Understanding People

Connecting with people is “rooted in humility, that you can become all things to all people.”

By Sharon Waters, Contributing Writer

As board chair of University Hospital in Newark, Tanya Freeman handles all the official duties of leading the state’s only public hospital. However, the conversations she has about COVID-19 at the grocery store are just as important.

“Someone just pulls me and says, ‘Hey, Tanya, you’re still working with the hospital, right? So, what’s the real deal?’” Freeman says. “It’s kind of: I feel comfortable, you look like me, I look like you, give me the real answer, not the script from a board meeting.”

Whether it’s COVID vaccines or the Moderna clinical trials at University Hospital, Freeman answers questions from the community, understanding the power of communication. A family law attorney with clients ranging from working class to CEOs, Freeman credits her father with her ability to connect with anyone. “That’s a skill set that is really rooted in humility, that you can become all things to all people, so that you can have a conversation with anyone,” she says.

As a girl, Freeman dreamed of becoming a Supreme Court justice. A first-generation student, she graduated from Caldwell University. Years later, as the mother of six, Freeman thought law school was an impossible goal – until she enrolled at age 40.

“Law school was sort of hope deferred,” says Freeman, who graduated in the top tier of her class at Touro Law.

Freeman chose divorce law because she could have a big impact on a family’s life at a pivotal time. “I like to say I approach family law a little differently because I am working very diligently to achieve an outcome, but also maintain a sense of calm,” Freeman says.

She was appointed to the University Hospital board



Tanya Freeman, board chair of University Hospital in Newark

in 2014 by then-Gov. Chris Christie, and chosen as board chair by Gov. Phil Murphy in 2018.

“Looking at sort of the healthcare failures in my own community, as a woman of color, I looked at University Hospital as a way to make things better,” Freeman says. “Wanting to see a community that looks like me live better, have better access to care so that we can have better outcomes for the future generations, as well as folks today, was important.”

COVID-19 has been a new challenge for the hospital. Freeman credits Dr. Shereef M. Elnahal, CEO, for steering the healthcare institution through the crisis, from the relentless toll on staff to the spike in admissions numbers. Freeman was an admit, staying overnight with COVID and pneumonia in November 2020. It was another chance for her to understand, firsthand, what the community experiences.

“You listen attentively, and then you offer solutions, whether it’s a client getting divorced, or a member of the community who’s saying, ‘Hey, I had a less than perfect experience at your hospital,’” Freeman says. “You sharing this with me allows me to bring it back to the leadership team, and it makes the experience that much better for the next patient.” **NJB**

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