

2020 Inspiration Award winner: Dawnia Baynes



Dawnia Baynes sees obstacles as opportunities.

by James Townsend

Dawnia Baynes has left her mark on too many National Multiple Sclerosis Society programs to list.

Born in Pittsburgh and now living in Compton, California, Baynes was diagnosed in 2006 when her body became numb from the chest down. She's one of those people who refuses to succumb to despair and who sees every obstacle as an opportunity. The source of her enthusiasm and positivity? "I have to say that it's my relationship with God. If it wasn't for Jesus, I might have fallen into an attitude of 'woe is me.'

"I know that I wasn't diagnosed just for the heck of it but have been given a real chance to ask, 'How can I help?' and treat people like I want to be treated. I thought, 'Well, apparently I must be able to handle this,' so I just started finding things I could do."

Diagnosed in her 20s while living in Georgia, Baynes couldn't find anyone her age to talk to about her disease. When she moved to California, she joined a group of people her age with MS called YPG, or Youthful Peers Group. She now leads the group.

"It made a real difference for me," she says.

In 2017, Baynes organized a self-help group for high school and college students called MS Youngsters, which currently meets monthly through Zoom because of the pandemic.

In March 2020, knowing the MS Youngsters were feeling down about missing in-person events, Baynes invited the award-winning actor Yvette Nicole Brown, who starred in the television comedy “Community,” on one of the group’s Zoom calls as a surprise.

“I knew the kids would remember her from her many roles in TV and movies,” Baynes says. “That was a great experience for them. She spent an hour and a half with them and answered all their questions.”

Baynes turned the group’s annual barbecue into a virtual graduation party for the high school seniors in August 2020, which Brown joined as well.

Baynes doesn’t have children of her own, but the MS Youngsters call her “MS Mama.”

Never one to sit still for long, Baynes has begun working on a book about her life and experiences. “I’ve written about 130 pages so far and hope to publish it in 2021 using a large type that people can more easily read. I even have ideas for the cover!”

James Townsend is a writer in Boulder, Colorado.

Meet more of the [2020 Inspiration Award winners](#).