

Hampton U. examines the Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

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By Antoinique Abraham

The 34th Annual Black Family Conference incorporated its theme, "Roots & Wings: The Road to the Future Runs through the Past," into a panel discussion based on this year's selected read-in book, "**The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks**," by Rebecca Skloot.

The panel discussion held on March 15, highlighted widespread issues concerning the black family.

Topics included were racism and discrimination, as well as individuals knowing their medical history.

Panelists included Denise Motley Johnston, human resources director for recruitment at Duke University; Karima Jeffery, associate professor in Hampton University's English Department; Fredda Bryan, breast cancer survivor with the American Cancer Society; and Phill Branch, assistant professor of English and Cinema Studies at HU.

"The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" is based on a poor black tobacco farmer, whose cells were taken without her knowledge or consent in 1951. This book tells the story of the collision between ethics, race, and medicine.

Johnston used the acronym R.E.A.D.Y to place the book into different categories: Respect, Ethics, Acknowledgement, Dignity, and the ability to say "yes," she said, are all important factors that individuals should taken into consideration before allowing one to conduct research.

"Where is our voice in research projects?" said Bryan, regarding the necessity and importance of being involved in your medical process. "What is meant for good can be turned into bad and ugly."

Although HeLa – Lack's cells – became one of the most important tools in medicine, she remains virtually unknown and her family can't afford health insurance.

Questions of race were prevalent in many of the inquiries to the panelists. A common thread was, would this book be relevant if it was written by a black woman, or if Henrietta Lacks was a white woman?

According to Branch, if this story was written by a black woman, the content would be same yet the publishing would have been different and her story wouldn't have been heard.



The Hampton University Read-In was scheduled on March 27 and 28.

For more information about the Henrietta Lacks Foundation, visit rebeccaskloot.com or henriettalacksfoundation.org.

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