

IN THE 'NOKE

# The Mother of Modern Medicine

written &amp; photographed by Kianna Price Marshall

The recent statue announcement for the late hero has received national attention in every major news outlet and newspaper.

**H**enrietta Lacks. A real life superhero whose superpower is healing. Her contribution to modern medicine has been felt all over the world. The subject of 2010 New York Times bestseller "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" caught the attention of thousands including Oprah Winfrey who later transformed this page turner into an HBO movie. Yet, many never realized that this unsung hero of medical research was born right here in Roanoke on August 1, 1920.

The home she was born in no longer exists. Where it once stood is now SW Roanoke's Perry Park. When she was four years old, Henrietta moved to Clover to live with her grandfather and cousins. It was there she met her husband. They later moved to Maryland and were the proud parents of five children. In 1951, at the age of 31, Lacks was diagnosed with cervical cancer and was treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. She fought for eight months until she lost her battle. But life was not done with Henrietta.

Dr. George Gey, a doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital, discovered that her unique and aggressive cancer cells were continuously multiplying under the right conditions. Her cells were the first human cells to grow in a lab.

However, the samples of her tumor were taken without her knowledge or consent and were subsequently used to create the HeLa cell line. These cells were able to reproduce at an extraordinary rate, making them incredibly valuable for scientific research.

The discovery and use of the HeLa cell line was a major breakthrough in the field of medical research. It allowed scientists to study the effects of certain treatments and drugs on living cells, which was previously impossible. Over the past several decades, this cell line has greatly contributed to the advancement of science: in vitro fertilization, gene mapping,

cloning, research on the effects of zero gravity in outer space, the development of polio and COVID-19 vaccines, the study of leukemia, AIDS virus and cancer worldwide, to name a few.

Researchers say in all, scientists have grown more than 20 tons of HeLa cells, and there are more than 11,000 patents that have come from the research done with them.

Despite the many benefits that the HeLa cell line has brought to medical research, the fact that Lacks's cells were taken without her knowledge or consent raises important ethical questions. Lacks's family was not informed of the use of her cells until over 20 years after her death. In recent years, Lacks's story has gained more public attention, and there have been efforts to address the ethical concerns surrounding the use of HeLa cells. In 2013, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reached an agreement with the Lacks family to establish guidelines for the use of HeLa cells in research. The agreement ensured that scientists would have access to the HeLa genome, but that the Lacks family would have some control over how it is used.

Over the last several years, a handful of local community activists have worked tirelessly to honor Henrietta in her hometown of Roanoke. Civic leaders like Marion Ware and former Councilwoman Anita James Price worked with the City of Roanoke and were able to declare May 14, 2011, as Henrietta Lacks Day. Henrietta's son, David "Sonny" Lacks, and two grandchildren were present the day the proclamation was announced. All three family members sit on the board of the National Institutes of Health to oversee the usage of Henrietta's genome.

During the remodel of the Science Museum of Western Virginia at Center in the Square in 2013, the hometown hero was honored with her portrait proudly displayed within the



stairwell. In October 2021, The World Health Organization honored Henrietta Lacks with an award in recognition of her contributions to the advancement of scientific research.

And most recently, thanks to individual and corporate contributions, \$160,000 was raised to immortalize her in a 400-pound life-sized bronze statue. This statue is dedicated to Lacks and her contribution to science and will be erected later this fall in downtown Roanoke. It will stand in the new Lacks Plaza, previously known as Lee Plaza. Community leaders like Councilwoman Trish White-Boyd in partnership with Harrison Museum of African American Culture worked with the Lacks' family estate to craft an image in her likeness. Roanoke artist Bryce Cobbs created the sketch based off of two family photos of Lacks. His rendering will be used as inspiration for the statue. Larry Bechtel, a Blacksburg artist, will sculpt the statue of Lacks.

Plans for the monument come five years after Johns Hopkins University named a campus building after Henrietta Lacks, and a portrait honoring the trailblazer was added to the National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC.

An astonishing young mother from Roanoke never dreamed her life would impact so many worldwide. And yet the hidden history of this young woman is simple; in her death she saved millions of lives. A legacy, just like Henrietta's cells, living on. ☆



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