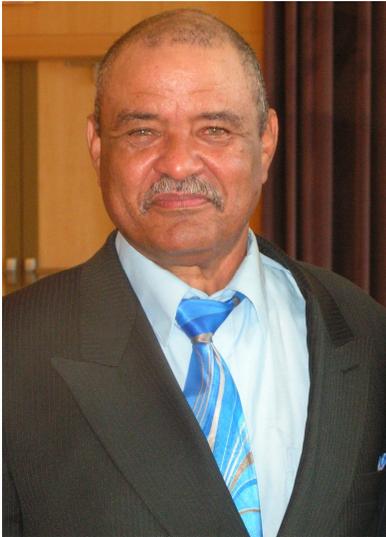




LYCEUM AGENCY

David “Sonny” Lacks | *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*



David “Sonny” Lacks has enthralled university and library audiences across the country talking about his mother Henrietta Lacks and her important contribution to modern medicine. The international success of Rebecca Skloot’s New York Times bestseller, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, has left people keenly interested in the Lacks Family and Henrietta’s legacy. In his appearances, Sonny shares with audiences what it meant to find out—decades after the fact—that his mother’s cells were being used in laboratories around the world, bought and sold by the billions. Sonny’s visits put a personal face to big issues such as the dark history of experimentation on African Americans, the birth of bioethics, and the legal battles over “informed consent” and whether we control the stuff we’re made of, and should share in the profits.

Henrietta Lacks was a poor black tobacco farmer whose cells, taken without her knowledge in 1951, went on to become the first immortal human cells ever grown in the laboratory. Those cells, nicknamed HeLa, became one of the most important tools in modern medicine, vital for developing the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization, and more. Though Henrietta died in 1951, her cells—alive and growing to this day—are still the most widely used cell line in the world.

No one told Henrietta’s family that the cells existed until the ‘70’s, when scientists wanted to do research on her children—Lawrence, Elsie, David “Sonny” Jr., Deborah, and Joseph—to learn more about the remarkable “immortality” of Henrietta’s cell line. Her children were then used in research without their consent, and without having their most basic questions about the cells answered (questions like, “What is a cell?” and “What does it mean that Henrietta’s cells are alive?”). Henrietta’s cells have helped biotech companies make millions of dollars, yet her family has never benefited from the commodification of HeLa cells.

Despite what the Lacks Family has endured, they are proud to honor the memory of Henrietta and her unparalleled contributions to science; their message is positive, optimistic, and—above all—celebrates Henrietta’s life and legacy. Sonny’s visits give audiences a sincere first-person perspective on the collision between ethics, race and the commercialization of human tissue, and how the experience changed the Lacks family forever.

PRAISE FOR DAVID “SONNY” LACKS and the FAMILY

I was really impressed with the turnout. They were so interested in every word; I have never seen a standing ovation there before! That’s really impressive and shows how powerfully your family can present your case to the community. Excellent job speaking from the heart.

— Mark Willis, Community Relations Manager, Dayton Big Read

Your visit has definitely been a highlight to my teaching career and a major highlight of my students’ educational experience. Your mother’s story and your family’s experience have brought awareness to her contribution to science and the health of others all over the world...[and] allowed my students to see the pride you have for your mother and how they need to make sure they always ask questions in order to understand their treatments or diagnosis from their doctors.

— Rachel Sanders, Biotech Teacher, Springfield High School