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INSPIRE AWARDS

## Inspire Awards: Quita Highsmith is an avid champion of patient advocacy

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*Editor's note: As part of our Most Influential Women in Bay Area Business publication, we are pleased to introduce this year's Inspire Award winners — three Bay Area female leaders who have been champions of issues surrounding diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion. All three work to make their companies boards and industries more inclusive and support the next generation of women leaders as mentors. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to read about our other honorees.*

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Quita Highsmith knows all too well the multifaceted challenges facing women of color in the workplace. But throughout her career in the biotech industry, her female managers stepped up to coach and advocate for her — ensuring that she had a seat at the table to effect lasting change and be her authentic self. As vice president and chief diversity officer at Genentech, Highsmith is a constant champion for traditionally underrepresented groups, from her tireless support of patient advocacy — ensuring people of color are included in clinical research — to addressing gaps in key leadership positions.

Last year, amid the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic, Genentech released a diversity and inclusion report that included ambitious plans to accelerate efforts to diversity its workforce in order to better reflect the community in which we live, a



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Quita Highsmith, vice president and chief diversity officer at Genentech

culmination of the work Highsmith has been fighting for throughout her career.

**How have women supported your career either as mentors or role models?** The majority of the women managers that I have had have been really supportive. Women of color have to code change so that we can be more like the majority and I've been very, very fortunate to have women leaders that have said, "You be who you are and bring your best self to the table." And that has allowed me to do the work that I had needed to do in order to be successful. My personal experience with mentors has been instrumental in my career success.

**How have issues surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion come to the fore at Genentech and in the biotech space during your tenure? Have you seen significant change during your tenure?** I think a lot of industries struggle with really thinking about diversity, equity and inclusion, and I think it has been taboo in the past.

Thinking about women in leadership roles is oftentimes easier for organizations to get behind. But when we think about the next step, and about the voices who don't have a seat at the table — the voices that are not represented in leadership are usually people of color, Black, Hispanic, Asian — I think over the last two years the U.S. in particular has really started to think about this issue, and how we can really start to take a deep dive and look at where we have gaps and whose voice is missing.

At Genentech, when I got hired into this role as the first chief diversity officer in 2020, I was working with CEO Alexander Hardy. We were really thinking about representation at all levels. This year, we launched our 2025 Diversity & Inclusion Commitments. One of our benchmarks is to double Black and Hispanic representation of directors and officers. We have a large Asian population, but that's not necessarily represented when we get to the most senior ranks of directors and officers, so we have put in goals around how we think about being a more inclusive environment. That starts in our leadership.

When people see people like me, my very presence creates possibilities. We've seen an evolution of women leaders moving into the executive ranks, where now 50-plus percent of our directors and officers are women. And now we have the opportunity to shine the spotlight on progressing people of color in our industry.

**That's an impressive benchmark. How did you pull that off?** It was a lot of work because when we first started, we heard "it's hard to find qualified women and women don't want to be leaders." I mean, that's ridiculous. Of course they want to be leaders, of course they're going to be qualified.

It's the same story now as we think about including more people of color in our leadership ranks, but the thing that I find incredibly comforting about Genentech is that you can raise your hand from any seat in the company and feel like you can make a difference.

Before my current role, I worked in patient advocacy as the head of that department and I went to a patient summit. I wanted to include patients of color in our research. We could not find one patient of color that had participated in a study and it led me and a colleague to start to ask why that was. When we took a look at the data around who was actually participating in clinical research, it was majority white — I'm talking about 90-plus percent of the participants.

We really started to challenge the organization and say, "We've got to improve on this." We want to make sure that patients who have diseases understand that we have treated patients that look like them.

There were a number of times over the course of these years where people were like, "who are you? You don't have a medical degree, so why are you challenging us and asking questions?" But I kept challenging the company and kept raising my hand.

**How did you juggle work and your personal life during this prolonged pandemic?** I feel like we are in an internal limbo. Covid has exacerbated and highlighted health disparities in communities of color. That is a challenge, but it also gives me hope because what Covid gave us was a chance to be silent and really take a deep look at the racial inequity in the country. It allowed us the space to ask what we are going to do about it.

The George Floyd murder gave companies in corporate America a chance to say, "We do have to be socially active for justice."

It gave us a chance to start talking about race at work, whereas before we would tiptoe around the conversations around race and health inequities. Covid has given us a chance to drive more inclusion, to be more proactive to magnify efforts and allow companies and people at companies to be change agents to really put diversity and inclusion front and center.

**In what ways have you had a reset over the past year and a half?**

Real change starts at home. And so for us, it starts with thinking about what we can contribute. In the last year and a half, we've been intentional about how we need to advance representation, how we need to think about inclusion of underrepresented communities of color in our research and about what voices are absent and how we get out of the echo chamber — and highlight those voices that are missing. We want to be changemakers.

**What drives you every day?** There's a quote by Margaret Mead that will stay with me: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

I'm driven by the opportunity to make a real impact and create a future that is more inclusive and more equitable, especially for the employees of Genentech and the patients that we treat.

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