

Making History: An Interview With Katrina Burton, AMWA's New President-Elect



Credit: The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

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The year 2020 was one that we will not soon forget. A global pandemic brought the world to its knees, social unrest reached a boiling point, and divisive politics made us weary.

And yet, there were countless bright spots amid the chaos. One of those bright spots occurred right here within AMWA, with Katrina Burton, BS, elected to serve as AMWA's next President-Elect. She is the first Black person to hold this position in the organization.

The announcement of her election filled me with excitement. Being asked to interview Burton for the *Journal* was like icing on the cake.

As a Black woman, I felt honored to be tasked with interviewing Burton to learn more about her life, medical writing career, and goals for AMWA.

I sat down with Burton—via Zoom, of course—prepared for an interview that ended up feeling more like a conversation between friends.

Growing Up in Texas

Burton was born in Houston, Texas, and grew up on the city's north side. Like many of us, her original career aspirations didn't include medical writing.

"I always had an interest in the medical field, especially the skin," she said. Her older sister battled a severe case of eczema, inspiring Burton to want to become a dermatologist. Without Google as an aid, she spent time at the school library and took advantage of her family's home encyclopedia collection to learn about dermatology.

Even with dreams of becoming a medical doctor, Burton loved writing. She enjoyed reading and writing fiction and family stories. "I was always told that I had a vivid imagination and that I should become a writer," she said.

After graduating from Booker T. Washington High School, a historically Black high school in Houston, Burton attended

Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. Initially entering college as a pre-med major, she switched to journalism, earning a Bachelor of Science in Journalism and a minor in Marketing.

While at Texas A&M, she served as a backup writer for *The Battalion*, the college newspaper.

Career Beginnings

"My journey is a very interesting story," Burton explained as she described her first few jobs after college.

Burton decided to stay in the Houston area after graduation. Although she loved writing, she discovered that writing for the local newsletter wasn't exactly lucrative. She took a job opportunity in retail instead while she pondered her next steps.

At a local retail clothing store, she began as an assistant manager and was promoted to manager. Burton weaved her love of writing in with her managerial responsibilities by creating a store newsletter. This newsletter caught the attention of the retail company's national office, and Burton was asked to expand the newsletter to the store's local region.

Knowing that writing was her true passion and retail would not be part of her long-term career plans, she started looking for opportunities that combined both her management and writing skills.

In addition to working in retail, Burton also explored her interest in graphic design and layout, still managing to weave writing into her work, landing several positions with well-known companies over the years.

Becoming a Medical Writer

Edging ever closer to medical writing, Burton worked as the Marketing Manager at Gulf Coast Regional Blood Center for 4 years. In her position, she worked with her team to recruit talent to appear in television commercials and marketing

materials in support of various projects, such as incentive programs and marketing initiatives. “This is where I honed my skills with project development,” she said.

She spoke with pride about leading the launch of the Center’s African American Commits for Life Program (now the Diversity Program), aiming to increase the number of Black blood donors. Within the first 6 months of the program, blood donations from Black blood donors increased by 25%.

As a part of her position, Burton wrote extensively for the blood bank and worked with philanthropic organizations on strategic initiatives. Working at the Center brought her back into the medical field, creating the beginnings of her medical writing career.

Burton then began working at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, where she has been for 13 years.

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Personal experiences spurred her decision to work at MD Anderson. Her father passed away from prostate cancer, and other family members have had a range of cancers and health issues.

At MD Anderson, she first served as an external communications specialist, then senior communications specialist. For 7 years, she covered cancer prevention, worked with local and national reporters, and wrote about groundbreaking cancer research and clinical trials.

Currently, she serves as a Program Manager in the Public Relations Office, managing the communications and media relations for MD Anderson’s Children’s Cancer Hospital. In this role, she continues to write and work with media to share pediatric patients’ experiences, essential research, and important patient programs.

Burton’s work varies from day to day, and she loves it. “I don’t just write stories and work with media: I also build relationships with researchers, clinicians, and other colleagues,” she said. “I truly enjoy getting to know patients and their families, and I am honored when they share a glimpse of their cancer journey with me. Seeing the patients do well and achieve success in life gives me so much joy.”

She has continued to pursue her passion for learning about the health care industry and sharing that information with others. “When you’re in a place where you can do good and share important stories, your job doesn’t feel like a job. Rather, it feels like a calling,” Burton remarked.

Getting Involved in AMWA

In 2010, early in her medical writing career, Burton’s director advised her to seek out science writing organizations to join. A Google search listed AMWA as the first search result.

She joined AMWA shortly before the Annual Conference that year. The conference, in her words, was “love at first sight.” It was an exhausting yet exhilarating experience for Burton, connecting her with others who were passionate about medical writing. Since then, she has attended every AMWA Medical Writing & Communication Conference, participating as a roundtable facilitator (2012, 2013) and open session speaker (2013, 2017, 2019).

Burton’s involvement in AMWA could fill an entire page. As a bonafide lover of volunteering, she first held numerous roles in the Southwest Chapter. To name just a few, she served as the chapter’s Publicity Coordinator, President and Immediate Past

President, Chapter Delegate to AMWA’s Board of Directors, and the Chapter Advisory Council (CAC) Representative.

After being instrumental in the most recent restructuring of AMWA’s National Board, Burton was invited to become active on the national level, serving as the first Chair of the CAC. When she was elected AMWA National Secretary, she was Chair of the Constitution and Bylaws Committee. Now, as President-Elect, she is the Chair of the Nomination Committee.

In 2020, Burton earned the distinction of being named a 2020 AMWA Fellow, a designation bestowed upon members who have achieved an exceptional level of service to the organization over time.

To add to her extensive list of AMWA activities, Burton also actively volunteers in her local community, serving on several boards and councils. She works with local schools to inspire a love of communication in young children. “This work helps build a diverse group of future communicators and allows me to do my part to ensure that the field of communications continues to thrive with different voices,” she said.

Tackling Misinformation

Burton believes that health and science misinformation is the biggest challenge in medical communication. This is not a new problem, of course, but medical communicators are uniquely positioned to take on this challenge.

To do so, Burton encourages all medical communicators to be proactive in writing accurate, fact-based information and

being credible sources of medical information. AMWA, she believes, can be the driving force in countering misinformation and teaching medical communicators how to be part of that driving force.

Serving as President-Elect

Since joining AMWA, Burton has been continually inspired by the organization's leaders with whom she has worked. She takes her commitment to AMWA, and her new role as President-Elect, seriously. "It is an honor and privilege to be elected as President-Elect of an organization that is doing essential, critical, and amazing work to promote excellence in the medical communication field," she said.

As President-Elect, Burton aims to grow AMWA's membership, expand AMWA Online Learning, and encourage membership among medical writers who specialize in public relations and marketing.

She also aspires to increase the ethnic diversity of AMWA's membership. To Burton, though, diversity in medical communication is about more than just ethnicity. It is also about a diversity of writing specialties, employment status, and medical topics (cancer, dental care, etc.).

"An organization is strengthened by its diversity," she said. "Diversity allows the opportunity to be educated on different perspectives, ideas, and values that can be crucial to organizational growth."

Becoming the First Black Female President-Elect

Burton considers being AMWA's first Black female President-Elect an accomplishment for her personally and for AMWA.

At first, though, she did not even realize that she was the first. Nevertheless, she recognizes the significance of this moment in AMWA's history. She plans to use her platform to encourage more minority medical writers to join AMWA, get involved, and pursue leadership positions within the organization.

Closing Thoughts

As we closed out our interview, I asked Burton to provide some words of wisdom for medical communicators who are starting their careers.

"Take advantage of AMWA's educational resources and tools, attend the AMWA Medical Writing & Communication Conferences, volunteer in your local AMWA chapter, and be intentional about building your expertise to align with your career trajectory." She also recommended taking advantage of AMWA's many networking opportunities that can promote collaborations and long-lasting friendships.

I am thrilled to see Burton serve as AMWA's President-Elect. While holding AMWA close to her heart, there is no doubt that she will continue to serve the organization well and push the medical communication field forward.

Author declaration and disclosures: The authors note no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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