

## **Diversity, Inclusion & Equity at the New York Orthopedic Hospital**

It is with the greatest pleasure that we, the women faculty in Orthopedic Surgery at Columbia University, write this letter to share our strongest possible recommendation of selecting Dr. William N. Levine for the Ruth Jackson Orthopedic Society He For She Award. Dr. Levine has distinguished himself as a leader with a vision and strategy that prioritizes diversity in Orthopedic Surgery. Change in orthopedics does not come easy nor is it for the faint of heart; nevertheless Dr. Levine has tirelessly put to use the varied tools of recruitment and advancement, leadership accountability, outreach and development, and making a bigger difference to impart an unprecedented impact on diversity of orthopedic surgery at Columbia University.

There has always been something special about the New York Orthopedic Hospital (NYOH), home to Columbia Orthopedics. At the tip of northern Manhattan, far away from the other orthopedic powerhouses of New York City, the NYOH is, above all else, a family. Our family has been formidably raising some of the most premier orthopedic surgeons for decades. Its storied history dates back to the Rockefellers and Roosevelts, and also to Dr. Barbara Stimson, a woman, who became the chief of the NYOH Fracture Service in 1928. In the last six years NYOH/Columbia Orthopedics, under the leadership of Dr. William Levine, has continued to rise (quite dramatically) in rankings. At the same time something else has happened in parallel: our family has become increasingly diverse.

**Recruitment and advancement:** In an orthopedic milieu of white men, NYOH stands apart. The current national average demographics for orthopedic surgery residency are 14.5% women and 20% underrepresented minorities. The Columbia orthopedic surgery residency training program has historically had more women and underrepresented minorities than the average. Over the last twelve years the program consistently boasts both 30% female residents and more recently 30% underrepresented minority residents. Interestingly and impressively, this training percentage held strong for years despite the fact that our orthopedics faculty did not reflect such diversity. Dr. Levine, who served as program director for the first half of those years, sought out former female and minority residents and fellows to serve as mentors for his current trainees, never underestimating the importance of that relationship. When Dr. Levine became department chair, the faculty started to diversify as well. Fast forward six years and our family now includes eleven full time female faculty members out of forty (27%), several of whom are underrepresented minorities and members of the LGBTQ community.

**Leadership accountability:** We do not have it all figured out, and Dr. Levine will be the first to tell you he may not have realized that hiring all of these women would result in an exponential growth of our orthopedic family's offspring, and in turn a revolving door of maternity leaves. There have been uncomfortable conversations, new challenges and unpredictable nuances that the department had not previously faced, but as a family we are learning together and making things better for our professional future and ultimately for patient care. He has welcomed controversial grand rounds that have made everyone squirm in their seats – discussing the hard topics of sexual harassment, equity and suicide. Dr. Levine understands this important perspective of diversity, and he knows it is making our family into better physicians, surgeons and citizens.

**Outreach and development:** Dr. Levine has a good instinct for when to reinvent the wheel versus needing to grease the wheel of a well run machine in the service of diversity. In the Fall of 2020, we hosted our fourth consecutive Perry Initiative event. Dr. Levine has been there to support his family and welcome others at our first three events. This year, even though virtual, Dr. Levine was there to show his commitment to women in our field. Next year, the department will become a host institution/sponsor for Nth Dimensions. Two years ago, Dr. Levine became a member of the Ruth Jackson Orthopedic Society. He has recommended numerous underrepresented faculty members for leadership roles at the local and national level; because of his encouragement and support many of us hold positions on the boards or presidential lines of national organizations. This year, Dr. Levine created two new positions within the department: a vice chair for wellness and a vice chair for diversity, equity and inclusion. The new wellness focus proved crucial as we found ourselves battling with the COVID crisis; fortunately we were able to remain united and safely apart. Establishing the department's own diversity chair gives us a seat at the Columbia University table to share how far we have come and to establish an ambitious plan for future improvements.

The spring of 2020 in New York City will be remembered by all. The NYOH family will remember Dr. Levine for his leadership in **making a bigger difference**. At the epicenter of the COVID pandemic, we will remember Dr. Levine volunteering to care for COVID patients in the ER/ICU with one of his interns, after several other faculty members begged him not to do so (perhaps we were afraid of what might happen if he fell ill). At the zenith of racial inequity and the Black Lives Matter movement, we will remember Dr. Levine for moving to dissolve the managed care clinic at Columbia, in an effort to reduce health care disparity. In the midst of resident application entropy, Dr. Levine created the Columbia Longitudinal Information Program (CLIP) and recruited over 100 fourth year medical students from around the country (who of course include women and underrepresented minorities) to participate in a 6 month long virtual sub internship experience. And now, as we start to crawl out from the rubble of the last few months (or has it been years?), Dr. Levine is devising a plan to make sure every single staff member of our family gets a well-deserved bonus.

To look around at each other, even if these days that means Brady Bunch/Hollywood Squares style on our Zoom faculty meetings, and know that each of us brings something different to our family table is a special feeling. We are a diverse group, unified not only by orthopedic surgery, but by our passion to bring the best care to our patients. That would not be possible without Dr. William Levine. If you ask any member of our family what it is that makes this place so special, it will always come back to the inclusivity of our New York Orthopedic Hospital family.

*“Bill is so supportive of me and my practice that he is willing to take time out of his busy schedule and travel to my remote campus to do cases with me that I would otherwise feel obligated to refer to more experienced partners. I can't think of a more selfless act from our well-established and respected shoulder specialist chairman. One of the best mentors and role-models I've ever had.”*

*“One of the main reasons I have felt so comfortable and chosen to spend my entire education and now my career at Columbia is the department's steadfast commitment to creating and maintaining a diverse environment. Under Dr. Levine's chairmanship, this mission has flourished and our*

*culture is all the better for it. His staunch support for women in orthopedics in particular is unmatched and I am proud to be a product and beneficiary of his leadership.”*

*“I was hired soon after Dr. Levine became chair and I have seen the department grow incredibly, most notably I went from being one of the only women to one of many. But, to Bill, it’s not just about checking a box - hiring women and people from diverse backgrounds is the easy part. But, creating an environment and nurturing that energy where we all feel equally valued and heard - that’s the action needed that he provides, day in and day out. I have never felt that my opinion is less than anyone else’s, and feel truly appreciative of that.”*

*“Bill Levine is a leader who puts his heart where his words are and I cannot say that about many people. He tirelessly works to diversify our department, residency and hospital. He has taken the time in his life to understand the complexities of a diverse patient population and the importance that diversity plays in providing healthcare to that community. He didn’t need to do that to be a good Department Chair (he already was that), but he did it anyway.”*

We have come a long way and perhaps have even farther to go, and not one of us could imagine moving forward without the leadership, guidance and commitment of Dr. William Levine. In summary, Dr. Levine’s leadership and vision are enormous assets to the field of orthopedic surgery and deserving of this RJOS He For She Award. We are pleased to endorse him without any reservations.

The Women Faculty of the Columbia Orthopedic Surgery Department,  
Nicole Belkin MD, FAAOS  
Morgan Busko MD  
Nadeen Chahine PHD  
Natasha Desai MD  
Lauren Redler MD, FAAOS  
Susanne Roberts MD, FAAOS  
Katherine Rosenwasser MD  
Christen Russo MD, FAAOS  
Wakenda Tyler MD, FAAOS  
Stephanie Shim MD  
Danica Vance MD

December 19, 2020

He For She Nomination Committee  
Ruth Jackson Orthopaedic Society

Re: William N. Levine, MD  
Chair, Department of Orthopaedic Surgery  
Columbia University

Dear Committee Members,

It is my pleasure to write a letter of support for Dr. William N. Levine's RJOS He For She nomination. I've known Bill since he came to Columbia as a shoulder and sports medicine fellow. At that point, I was the program director and was the only full-time woman faculty member.

I started in the Columbia Department of Orthopaedic Surgery more than 30 years ago and I was the first female resident to have a baby (I had twins) and for a long time, the only one who had done so while a resident. I mention these details because, although I had an excellent experience for my years as a resident and faculty member, it was noticeable that there were so few women. There were no particular negative issues; it simply wasn't a department that was known as supportive of women. That dramatically changed when Bill was named the Chair.

Bill made a deliberate and clear effort to diversity the department and has added women faculty in virtually every division. There are now and have been many female residents and fellows. Bill is a staunch advocate for women's advancement and a personal mentor for women both inside the department and throughout Columbia and New York Presbyterian. And, a women orthopaedic surgeon taking a parental leave is just commonplace and unremarkable. As it should be.

I left the clinical practice of orthopaedics a number of years ago to become a hospital executive for New York Presbyterian. We have two partner medical schools, Columbia and Weill Cornell so I work with many department chairs. It's hard for me to identify another chair who is more supportive of women's advancement than Bill Levine.

Finally, I'd like to share a small vignette. Bill was unsuccessful in recruiting a talented female surgeon and called to let me know that it had not worked out. She had some family issues that were difficult to resolve. We agreed that was disappointing and I thought that would be the end of it. A few weeks later, Bill called me back to say that this had been nagging at him since he knew she was turning down a great opportunity. He subsequently called the recruit, helped her work through the family issues, and gave his personal assurances that he would provide ongoing support. Long story short – she joined the department and has been outstanding.

Please add my strong voice to the He For She Nomination for William Levine.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura Forese". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Laura Forese  
R JOS Member Emerita