

Celebrities gather to dedicate brain tumor center

Neurosurgeon Keith Black presides at the opening of the Cedars-Sinai facility, named in honor of his friend, the late Johnnie Cochran Jr.

BY SANDY BANKS,
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Cedars-Sinai neurosurgeon Keith Black has counseled thousands of patients with brain tumors. As one of the preeminent doctors in his field, he performs hundreds of brain surgeries each year. But few things have been more wrenching, he says, than watching his friend, attorney Johnnie Cochran, succumb to one of the deadliest types of brain tumors two years ago.

On Thursday, Black presided over the opening of the Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. Brain Tumor Center, dedicated to promoting promising treatments for the cancers and funded largely by donations from many of Cochran's admirers and celebrity friends.

The center's dedication drew an assortment of entertainment industry glitterati to an afternoon lunch at Cedars-Sinai



CANCER CENTER DEDICATED: Actor Sidney Poitier is among the celebrities on hand for the opening of the Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr Brain Tumor Center at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center



TEAM: Neurosurgeon Keith L. Black and Dale Mason Cochran, widow of Johnnie Cochran, at the gala

Medical Center and an evening gala at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel.

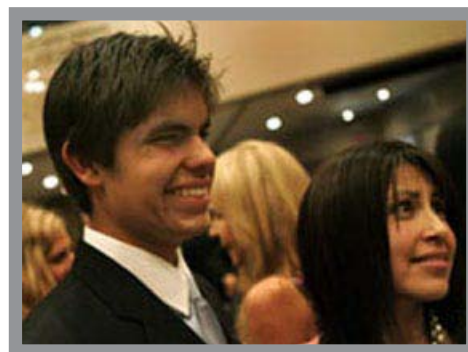
Black is a star in his own right, consistently voted one of America's best doctors by his peers and considered among the top 10 neurosurgeons and brain tumor researchers in the world.

Cochran, long a hero in civil rights circles and the Los Angeles black community, became one of the country's most recognizable attorneys when he won an acquittal for O.J. Simpson in 1995.

The surgeon and the lawyer were praised at the luncheon by movie icon Sidney Poitier, who called them men of "compassion, intellectual brilliance and unyielding determination in fighting against the odds."

But the highlight of the lunch was 16-year-old Jonathan Duncan, a Valencia High School sophomore who told the center's benefactors that he owes his life to Black's skill and their support. "I want to let you

know: This man is my hero," Jonathan said. "And if it weren't for people like you, I wouldn't be standing here."



SUCCESS STORY: Former brain tumor patient Jonathan Duncan, 16, and his mother, Tasha Noriega, join Hollywood glitterati at the opening of the Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. Brain Tumor Center. His case was once considered hopeless.

Celebrities gather...

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Jonathan was diagnosed with a brain tumor when he was 7. His family sought Black's help after almost a dozen doctors pronounced him a lost cause. "The doctors said it was an inoperable tumor, and nothing could be done," said Jonathan's mother, Tasha Noriega. "Dr. Black found a pathway to reach the tumor and got it out."

Today, Jonathan is on the honor roll, with a 4.2 grade point average, and runs the mile on his school's track team. The tumor left him blind in one eye and with a surgi-



BACKERS: *Keisha Whitaker, left, wife of Forest Whitaker, joins Pauletta Washington, wife of Denzel Washington*

cal scar across his head. "But you can't see that unless I cut my hair. And the girls seem to like it," he said, drawing laughter and applause from the crowd.

Now his family counsels other tumor patients and works to promote the fledgling research center "because we want to make sure the families get to the right place, so they don't have to hear what we heard," Noriega said.

In an interview, Black said the incidence of brain tumors is rising, and the prognosis for most patients is bleak. Brain tumors are the leading cause of cancer deaths among children and teenagers. About half of all brain tumors are malignant, and half of those are the highly aggressive form known as glioblastoma, which kills most patients within two years.

Standard treatments aren't very effective, Black said, but there has been an explosion in new treatments, including a vaccine that can increase some patients' survival time. Research is following several promising threads, but getting treatments from the lab into the doctor's office has been a challenging process, he said. Only about 5% of patients diagnosed with brain tumors are placed in clinical trials.

The new center, launched with more than \$5 million in donations, aims to become a clearinghouse for research advancements, to shepherd new discoveries through patient trials and the government approval process, and expand and speed up patient access worldwide.

"Time for these patients is of the essence," Black said. "They don't have the luxury of waiting two or three or five years for these treatments to get out." The center has a handful of high-profile backers, including Poitier and the wives of Academy Award-winning actors Denzel Washington and Forest Whitaker. "It's begging for a good cause," Pauletta Washington said, urging supporters to "open your pocketbooks and your checkbooks" to help fund Cochran's legacy.

Cochran's widow, Dale Mason Cochran, called the center a fitting tribute to her

husband, who battled the debilitating disease long enough to walk his daughter down the aisle at her wedding just months before he died.

His struggle had special resonance for Black, whose family shared vacations with the Cochran family.

"To see a man so brilliant and so articulate affected by something so devastating as a brain tumor was a tragedy on so many levels," Black said. "It's tragic that someone who provided so much hope for a community -- fighting for civil rights and justice -- was affected by something that would take away his voice.

"After I got over the shock -- after his family and friends got over the shock -- we realized that Johnnie would always want to keep fighting, to keep giving back. This is one way he can do that. Out of his last struggle, he can help other people who'll be diagnosed so they won't have to struggle so much."