



*Family*  
**JEWEL**



**HER  
KINGDOM IS VAST:**

music, movies, makeup, TV. Some even call the multitalented media mogul the next Oprah. But the role Queen Latifah cherishes most is caregiver. As her daytime talk show continues to take off, she remains grounded by taking care of her mom

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT JONES/TRUNK ARCHIVE



## QUEEN LATIFAH

**is many things: Grammy Award-winning singer and hip-hop star. Oscar-nominated actor. Popular talk show host. And executive producer, too. But if you ask this multitasked entertainer what she is first and foremost, she'll say, "daughter." And a most devoted one at that.**

Born Dana Owens in Newark, N.J., Queen Latifah, 44, has always been close to her family, whom she credits with instilling in her the confidence to succeed. However, when her beloved mom, retired high school teacher Rita Owens, 65, was diagnosed in 2013 with scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disorder that in her case is quite advanced, Latifah knew it was time to take on yet another role: caregiver.

*"I've found if I take a moment for myself in peace and quiet to gather my thoughts, I'm ready to go...Then I can go into the day and tackle anything that comes my way."*

"We didn't recognize what it was," Latifah says. "She just passed out cold, fainted at school one day." With a host of seemingly unrelated symptoms appearing throughout the previous decade, "it took us years to diagnose it. Mom didn't have all the indicators in the scleroderma box. The critical issue for her is pulmonary hypertension, which scleroderma can cause, and which can be life threatening."

As this family crisis unfolded, the singer/actor simultaneously launched *The Queen Latifah Show*. Recently renewed for its second season, the daytime TV chatfest showcases Latifah interviewing guest celebrities; cooking up healthy recipes; riffing hilariously with her comedic chops; offering travel, beauty, and style tips; warmly addressing her viewers like old friends while discussing topical events; and hosting

an array of musical guests. Add a website that works very much like an online magazine into the mix, and what you get is a new cross-channel, lifestyle brand.

It makes sense. Hollywood has long known "La"—as her friends affectionately call her—to be the rare star who possesses genre-busting talent coupled with business acumen.

But launching a new show is stressful. Long hours go hand-in-hand with the creative fulfillment that comes with starting something from scratch. Yet, Latifah never wavered from her first priority: her ailing mom.

### CALLED TO CARE

Scleroderma, which affects fewer than 500,000 Americans each year, is a connective tissue disease that causes thickening of the skin. The condition can harm the lungs, heart, and kidneys, and the internal organs of the digestive system. Symptoms fall on a spectrum from mild to severe, and are grouped in two camps: localized and systemic. Rita's were in the latter, more serious category.

Her related development of pulmonary hypertension—a type of high blood pressure that affects the arteries in the lungs and leads to heart failure of the right side of the heart—caused the most dangerous and obvious side effects, including fatigue,

shortness of breath, chest pain, and fainting spells.

As a result, Rita requires regular care and medical assistance. "It's the reason we moved her to L.A.," says Latifah, who actively manages her mother's medical care. Referring to herself as "the point person," she enlisted close friends and family members, including her mother's husband, to help with the ongoing demands of caregiving. "We're a team," she says. "We're in this together."

Even with a strong support system in place, Latifah found that meeting her own professional commitments while caring for her mom could be demanding. "To launch a talk show and go through that at the same time was challenging," she admits. "But it was also cool in a way, because I'd come home and there she was. That part was wonderful."



## What Is SCLERODERMA?

FREDRICK WIGLEY, MD, MARTHA McCRORY PROFESSOR OF MEDICINE AND DIRECTOR OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS SCLERODERMA CENTER, EXPLAINS THE RARE CONNECTIVE TISSUE DISEASE.

### AUTOIMMUNE DISORDER

"Scleroderma isn't hereditary," Wigley says, but "there may be a genetic predisposition for triggering the autoimmune response, similar to lupus. It usually appears in patients around age 50."

### PUZZLING FACT

Scleroderma affects African Americans and Native Americans at higher rates. No one yet knows why.

### TOUGH DIAGNOSIS

The most common initial symptom is called Raynaud's, when fingers and toes feel very cold. "The skin appears to be white or blue," says Wigley, "or, when it warms, bright red. It starts with swelling, itching, and burning and progresses until the skin becomes wood-like, or fibrotic. A doctor will diagnose it when he can't pinch the skin between his fingers."

### LIFE-THREATENING

Wigley estimates 80% of scleroderma patients have some lung involvement, from mild to severe. The remaining 20% have severe lung involvement. "Since many diseases affect the lungs, such as asthma, it can easily be misdiagnosed."

### EARLY TREATMENT

"In the first phases you can repair the damage. The earlier the diagnosis, the better. However, current therapies can arrest the damage, even when half of the lung has been lost to the disease."



She laughs. “I did feel a little jealous of *The Queen Latifah Show*, because I’d want to talk with her, and she’d be like: ‘Wait! The show is on!’ And I’d say, ‘I’m here in person! You do know I’m Queen Latifah, right, Mom?’ And she’d say, ‘Wait until the show is over!’”

Latifah and her family join the nearly 40% of American families that offer some kind of caregiving, from extensive personal care to tackling tasks such as bill paying or grocery shopping, according to a 2013 Pew study. Gail Hunt, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Caregiving, says the number of families in a caregiving situation is bound to grow. “As baby boomers—a generation with fewer offspring to share the burden of caregiving—age and develop health problems, we can expect this issue to become front and center in coming years.”

“Data show 60% to 70% of caregivers work,” Hunt continues, “and most must make some kind of work accommodation such as coming in late, leaving early, reducing to part-time, or even quitting or taking early retirement to meet caregiving demands.”

In addition to the stress of balancing the private and professional, “there is caregiver burnout,” Hunt adds. “Signs of burnout include losing your temper a lot, showing a lack of patience, and neglecting your own health. You can even face financial ruin if health care costs are draining your savings.”

Hunt suggests caregivers seek relief in every way possible. “Look to your church



## The Queen’s Crown Jewels

QUEEN LATIFAH LIVES BY HER OWN SET OF RULES. HERE, THE STAR OF THE MUSICAL FILM *CHICAGO*, THE COMEDY MOVIE *BEAUTY SHOP*, AND MORE RECENTLY THE LIFETIME TV MOVIE *STEEL MAGNOLIAS*, SHARES HER PHILOSOPHY FOR A HEALTHY AND HAPPY LIFE.

**Confidence is earned.** “It’s not something you’re born with,” Latifah, who

plays iconic blues singer Bessie Smith in HBO Films’ upcoming *Bessie*, says of true self-worth. “Everyone feels insecure sometimes. Do things that inspire you and make you feel like, ‘OK, I’m not so bad.’ Appreciate who you are, and what you have.”

**To thine own self be true.** The former Jenny Craig spokesperson is well aware how her weight has

fluctuated over the years—and she’s OK with that. “I know what to eat and what not to eat,” she said in 2012. “But I just like doing what I want, you know? I’m rebellious like that!”

**Be resilient.** In 1992 Latifah’s older brother, Lance, died at age 24 in a motorcycle crash—riding a bike she had given him as a present. “I’ve battled self-doubt, like when my brother passed

away,” she says now. “Then I remember I’m doing this for my family. Music, acting, being creative is my joy. That’s what picks me up.”

**Climb more mountains—literally.** “There are always more mountains to climb,” says the Oscar-nominated actor. “In fact, I keep meeting people who say they’ve climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. So I’ll climb Mount Kilimanjaro! Why not?”

or synagogue, create a support network who can help, or look into respite care. Be sure to get regular checkups, and don’t ignore dental work. You’d be shocked to learn how many caregiving spouses die before the partners they’re caring for, simply because they’ve neglected their own health for so long.”

Latifah feels grateful because her financial and emotional needs are covered. “I feel blessed to have so many people who

I’m sitting down, I’ll right myself and align my spine. The cool thing about yoga is you don’t have to be in class. You can apply its techniques to your life throughout the day. Which I do.”

*“The cool thing about yoga is you don’t have to be in class. You can apply its techniques to your life throughout the day.”*

love and care about my mother to be there for her,” she adds. “That’s really important. I really feel for people who don’t have that support, because it can be so tough sometimes.”

### LA’S LAND

Queen Latifah’s schedule has been grueling. She spent the summer filming her upcoming HBO biopic, *Bessie*, based on the life and music of legendary blues singer Bessie Smith, with weekends shuttered in the studio recording Smith’s classic songs for the film’s soundtrack. She’s executive producer on the project, too.

As for *Bessie*, the project inspired a deep appreciation for the artist and legend she portrays. “I’ve fallen in love with the power of her voice. Bessie Smith inspired Janis Joplin, the Rolling Stones. No one sounds like this woman—including me. I’m doing the best I can to bring her story and sound to the screen, so people will discover what a treasure she was.”

Latifah knows keeping her busy life balanced is essential to maintaining her own good health—caring for herself so she can continue to take care of her mom. “I’ve found if I take a moment for myself in peace and quiet to gather my thoughts, I’m ready to go,” she says. “Wake up and don’t speak to anyone, just take five minutes to breathe and stretch and breathe some more. Then I can go into the day and tackle anything that comes my way.”

As for exercise, “I’m nowhere on the routine I’d like to be on right now, being so busy. Maintenance is a challenge,” she admits. “The treadmill is tried and true. Or I might jump on a bike for 30 minutes. Lately it’s bike riding and walking. I like to be outside, go to the park, hike. I like yoga—if I can stand against the wall and connect my back against it, or if

A healthy eater who never “diets”—“Diet is what you eat everyday, not what you don’t!” she says—Latifah does avoid fried foods and salt, but occasionally indulges in favorites like mac and cheese. Long a leading face of CoverGirl cosmetics, she’s aware she’s helped to redefine standards of beauty to include women of color and, just as important, women with curvy physiques. The star says her total self-acceptance, which has led to such opportunities, comes from her family’s enduring love for her. And she’s happy to return it.

“My parents always told me I was beautiful. They helped me through those awkward stages. They sat me down, explained things. They trusted me. They said: ‘Go out there and try it, do it!’ When I fell flat on my face, they dusted me off. And I went on.”

Now that roles have reversed and it’s her mother who needs support, Queen Latifah says, “I always keep that in mind.”

Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD, WebMD Lead Medical Editor