

Dear Doctor: **Gina Sam**

The Trinidadian gastroenterologist whose passion for helping others and medical expertise allows her to give back to underserved communities



Dr. Gina Sam's office is located Midtown Manhattan, where she treats patients with a variety of gastroenterology issues. But her office also serves as a wellness center, with services including personal training, acupuncture and massage therapy. All together, it's a unique approach to treatment that truly encompasses the mind and the body. Read on to hear what inspired her to become a doctor, how she fuses her passions for her culture and medicine to help build healthier communities, and her go to karaoke song!

"I was born in Trinidad and Tobago and moved to the US when I was nine years old. I remember going to the health clinics in Trinidad with my mom and being scared of getting shots. At the same time, I was curious about what all these injections were for. I wanted to help people since I was a very young girl. There are no doctors in my family; I wanted to be the first one."

Life in the Caribbean

Growing up, I remember my father always telling my sisters and I that he wanted us to excel in life and get an education in the US. He wanted us to have more opportunities. Whenever we didn't know something, he'd tell us to look it up—to read. This was instilled in us at a young age. Both of my parents were very supportive of us achieving our academic goals, and I'm so grateful for that; not everyone has that support.

I want others to know it's possible for someone to come from a humble home and become somebody who's going to make a difference.

Thoughts on Gastroenterology

I decided to specialize in gastroenterology when I was in my third year as a medical student at Tufts University. I was impressed by the different procedures that a gastroenterologist can do, particularly colonoscopies for colon cancer screenings. I remember one patient who was cirrhotic and was having a gastrointestinal bleeding episode due to esophageal varices (large veins from congestion in the liver that can burst and lead a patient to bleed out). I was mesmerized that a simple rubber band could be placed on a bleeding vein and the patient's life was saved. I also liked the ability to treat multiple diseases such as celiac disease, IBS, GERD, colon cancer and many more in different age groups.

GERD is very common in the US population and correlates directly with the high rates of obesity we are seeing in the US. I perform several different tests to document GERD. One procedure that has been around for over 10 years—but has become more in vogue due to the scientific data and the non-invasive nature—is Stretta. It's done in the end of the esophagus around the lower esophageal sphincter. I performed this procedure on [CBS news](#) with Dr. Max Gomez.

For IBS, one of the hallmark treatments that I use is low FODMAPS diet which was developed by the Monash group. The basic precedent is to cut out gluten, sugars, fructans and several other food items that essentially promote gas productions by your gut bacteria and cause pain and discomfort.

Often, when a patient comes in for GI symptoms due to IBS, it's secondary to other factors, such as work stress, family stress, or abuse.

This is why I recommend acupuncture, personal training, cognitive behavioral therapy, and massages—all of which I offer at my practice.

Giving Back

I always wanted to give back to my community, so I while I was in medical school, I also got a Masters in Public Health. Volunteering has been a part of my life since high school, when I used to help out in hospitals. In medical school, I got involved with the [Organization for International Development \(OID\)](#). The founder, Dr. Streete, is an amazing dentist and has been working for many years with medical missions. I was so taken aback by how appreciative people were with the care provided on these missions that I decided to get more involved.

After I received my MPH in 2003, I realized that I wanted to start my own foundation. My older sister was killed in the World Trade Center; she was one of the 13 Trinidadians who died on 9/11. My dream and legacy for her—and also for a close friend who passed away from cancer—was to create a foundation. Thus, I started the R & R Foundation for Global Health to fund medical missions in the Caribbean and South America. Ultimately, my goal is to build a center inspired by the World Trade Center in St. Lucia. I want there to be an emergency room, a gastroenterology suite, office buildings and condominiums—a place where everyone can come together.

As part of my work in public health, I have been promoting awareness of colorectal and gastric cancer in the Caribbean starting off in St. Lucia. St. Lucia reminds me of my home; it's a small version of Trinidad. The cultures are very similar, yet it also has a lot of French influence in the architecture, which I love. Over the years, I've met a lot of people there and they are all so welcoming. I plan to open a practice in St. Lucia soon.

Even though it's such a small island, there is a huge need for gastroenterological care. The rate of colorectal and gastric cancer in the Caribbean is almost 10 times higher than in the US because there are no standardized screening programs. When I was last in St. Lucia, I did a lot of colon cancer screenings. I went out in the community to talk about prevention and how smoking and eating right have a big impact on one's gastroenterological health. Through this, I realized the importance of educating others as much as possible.

Another project I've been working on in St. Lucia, is a campaign to keep the beaches clean. Everyday when I was there last, I was out talking to people about why they shouldn't throw styrofoam or plastic into the ocean because of the damage that it causes to ocean life. There is also a negative impact on our health too because if people eat the fish with the microplastic ingestion it can cause cancer. People began listening and catching on. It was so great to see them starting to collect their trash instead of disposing it in the water. Many of them asked me why I care so much. It's simple—this is our beach and it's what makes this country beautiful.

Listening and making a difference

It's so exciting when a patient comes to me and thanks me for listening to them. It can be something simple like taking the time to go over a patient's diet, or recognizing their need to be referred to a Cognitive Behavior Therapist. I think we are so caught up in the business side of medicine (which is important), that we need to work harder to remember the patients come first.

In my career I've gone from practicing at Stony Brook University to working at Mount Sinai to joining a practice downtown and now having my own practice. Every step of the way, what is most rewarding is when my patients follow me because we have established a relationship. Just the other day, one of my patients called my office looking for me. He was a patient of mine from back when I was at Stony Brook. It touches my heart to see the impact I've had on patients over the course of their life.

Lightning Round

Everybody could use a bit more...love.

I feel look after when...I'm surrounded by my family and friends, laughing.

One thing all New Yorkers can do for their health...exercise and walk more.

I'd call my style...Caribbean glamour!

Favorites

NYC neighborhood: Upper East Side.

Vacation spot: St. Lucia.

NYC Museum: The Met. My favorite artist is definitely Pablo Picasso. One of my favorite exhibitions was the Brooklyn Museum: Killer Heels, I just love shoes!

Go to Karaoke song: Hello by Adele.

Summer read: I am Malala.

Brands that keep you healthy: Chobani and Pellegrino, but I also cook a lot at home with fruits and veggies!



You can learn more about Dr. Gina Sam [here!](#)