

## Advocating for Equitable Care in Oral Health and Beyond

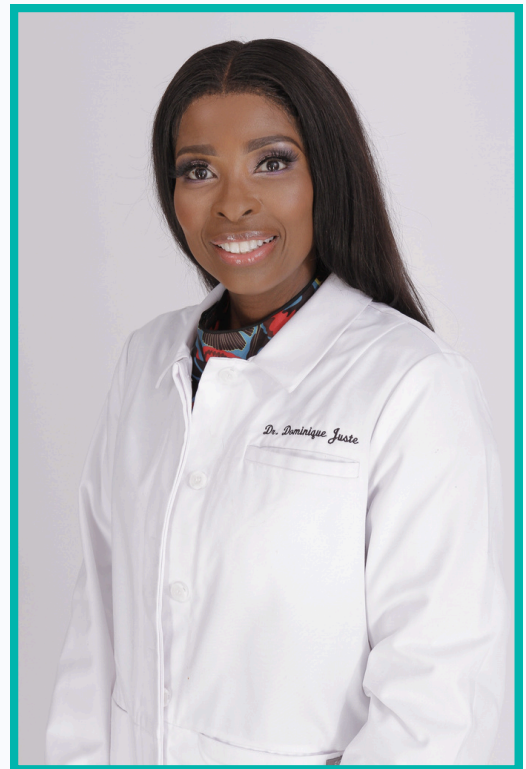
Meet Dr. Dominique Juste-Jules, 2024 Apa Scholar

***Dominique Juste-Jules, DMD*** is a dedicated dentist and public health advocate committed to improving access to oral health care in marginalized communities.

*Dr. Juste began her career serving in high-need areas where she witnessed the systemic barriers to care. She currently serves as dental director for the Department of Corrections in Albany, NY, and as a clinical instructor at NYU College of Dentistry. She is also pursuing an MPH with a focus on oral population health.*

*Dr. Juste's journey to becoming an Apa Scholar is a testament to both her resilience and sense of purpose.*

*We recently spoke with Dr. Juste to discuss her inspirations and aspirations.*



### What was your path leading up to the Apa Scholarship, and what inspired you to apply?

I migrated to the U.S. from Haiti at age seven, and I know what it's like to be the minority, to be bullied, to struggle. My mom worked as a dental assistant, and the dentists at Kings County Hospital mentored me—they became like family. I knew I wanted to become a dentist to give back, especially in underserved areas.

Early in my career, I witnessed the consequences of poor oral health caused by a lack of affordability, access, and oral health literacy. I saw kids who didn't even own toothbrushes. Later, in the South Bronx and Bushwick, I treated women from halfway houses—people who just needed a chance—but their oral health issues were one of many barriers they faced. When they secured jobs after receiving dental care, it was life-changing.

Working in corrections opened my eyes even further. I realized that many incarcerated individuals rely on prison to access basic care. One patient told me, "I know I won't get the same care outside," and that broke my heart.

I'd always dreamed of earning an MPH, but time and cost held me back. When I learned about the Apa Scholarship, it felt like fate—someone was investing in my dream to make a bigger impact.

*Now, as an Apa Scholar, Dr. Juste is expanding her impact through public health. The program has deepened her understanding of how health inequities are perpetuated by inadequate policies—especially for people who cycle in and out of systems of care, like those impacted by incarceration.*

*Her focus is on Medicaid reform—advocating for expanded coverage so that vulnerable populations can access essential dental services.*

### Has your perception of your field or career aspirations evolved through this program?

Absolutely. Before, I didn't fully grasp the power of policy. Now, I see how systemic change can transform entire communities.

For example, Medicaid says it covers root canals, but approvals are rare and providers often refuse the low reimbursements. That leaves patients in pain, vulnerable to worse health outcomes, and sometimes unable to work—or even smile.

Incarcerated individuals represent another glaring gap. Their oral health deteriorates after release because they can't access care. One man re-offended and told me he came back to jail just to see me—his “dentist.” That's not justice. I want policies that ensure continuity of care so no one falls through the cracks.

### In what ways is the Apa Scholarship equipping you to create an impact?

The scholarship has been the driving force behind my MPH. The financial support lifted a huge burden, but it's also been deeply motivational—I want to honor this opportunity by making a difference. I'm especially grateful for the leadership of [CUNY SPH Distinguished Professor] Dr. Luisa Borrell; the scholars are fortunate to benefit from her mentorship throughout this program.

The program has taught me to frame my experiences as advocacy. Now, I'm not only treating patients—I'm working to change the systems that fail them.

My goal is to influence Medicaid policy, expand coverage, and ensure providers are fairly compensated. Oral health is tied to dignity, employment, and overall well-being. With this degree, I'll keep fighting so everyone gets the care they deserve.

*The Apa Scholarship has been transformative for Dr. Juste, providing both financial support and a platform to amplify her advocacy. With her MPH, she aims to bridge longstanding gaps in oral health care, ensuring everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, has the chance to smile with confidence.*



“This program is teaching me how to turn my experiences into policy change.”

*Launched in 2021 by visionary philanthropist and aesthetic dentist Dr. Michael Apa, the Apa Scholarship Fund in Oral Population Health established a new area of public health study at CUNY SPH exploring the intersection of oral health and public health. In Fall 2024, the scholarship welcomed its second cohort of 10 Apa Scholars, including Dr. Juste.*

*To learn more about the Apa Scholarship and other CUNY SPH Foundation programs, visit [foundation.sph.cuny.edu](https://foundation.sph.cuny.edu).*