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In Her Own Words

BY ZORA BROWN

For me, breast cancer was a journey that began before I was born. Both my great-grandmother and grandmother were diagnosed with breast cancer at a time when little was known of this disease—and there was little reason for hope.

Mammography had not yet been invented; genetic factors were unknown; radical mastectomy was virtually the only treatment option; and the survival statistics were grim. No one knew what caused breast cancer, so it was something to discuss in whispers—a secret shame. So powerful was the stigma of cancer that women like my great-grandmother kept silent about it.

It is often said that the Lord helps those who help themselves. In many ways, for those willing to seek answers, help has arrived in the form of knowledge. We have many more resources to fight breast cancer than we did in the time of my great-grandmother, because we know so much more about the disease. We know now, for instance, why cancer has struck five generations of women in my family: a genetic defect handed down from mother to daughter that predisposes us to breast and ovarian cancer. We also know that, as African-Americans, the women of the Brown family and others like us are at risk for more aggressive cancers that strike earlier and have higher fatality rates. Medical advances in mammography, surgical techniques, genetic screening, chemotherapy and hormonal therapy have enabled us to watch for signs of cancer, to catch its appearance earlier, to treat the tumors before they spread and even to accomplish something unthinkable to earlier generations: cure it.

Hope, humor, spirit and positive thinking. These are weapons I got from my mother—weapons that my sisters and I have used to our own and others' benefit. The third generation of Brown women confronted with cancer was the turning point: My mother, also diagnosed with breast cancer, faced the same limitations as the women who preceded her, but she found the strength to overcome them. She used her knowledge of family history and emerging medical advances to fight back; she resisted the impulse to resign herself to death by cancer. Her hope, optimism and desire for information to aid her fight were passed on to her four daughters. These strengths proved critical as, one by one, each one of us was diagnosed with cancer.

Understanding my family and racial histories taught me to be alert. Although this knowledge did not render me immune from breast cancer, it did facilitate its early detection, which helped me survive when it did strike. As a member of a high-risk family, my sisters and I, and now our nieces, have come to understand that we have been given, not a genetic curse, but a gift—the gift of knowledge and the inspiration to use that knowledge to address the challenges of breast cancer, and to imbue other survivors with hope.

With two million other breast cancer survivors in the United States today, the Brown women are a living testament to the power of knowledge and early treatment to significantly reduce the ravages of this insidious disease.

Zora Brown and LaSalle D. Leffall, Jr., MD, 100 Questions & Answers about Breast Cancer, 2003: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, Sudbury, MA. www.jbpub.com
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