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Advocating for the African American Community

BY KATHY LATOUR

Vernal Branch says she hopes the data on black women, who are HER2-positive and HER2-negative and are having a worse outcome when treated with adjuvant treatment, will prompt more research on issues in the African American breast cancer community.

“When the BRCA1 and BRCA2 information came out as being more prevalent in the Jewish community, they got up in arms because it was another stigma,” Branch says. “But it was also ammunition to help get more research. Information is the key to arm ourselves to demand more research.”

Branch was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer in 1995 at age 45, only two months after her annual mammogram showed she was fine. She says becoming a breast cancer advocate was an easy choice since she has always been involved in some form of advocacy since she was a child.

“I marched for the first time for civil rights when I was 13,” she recalls of her early life in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. “The police arrested my cousin who was 16, but they called my father who came and got me. He asked me if I was going to continue doing this and I said, ‘yep.’”

After earning a degree in political science and history, Branch volunteered at her sons’ schools and eventually was offered the job of coordinating all volunteer activities for 26 schools in the Houston Independent School District. She had to turn the job down because her husband had made a career change that required a/them to move from Houston to San Diego. Shortly after the move, she was diagnosed.

“My mother told me two years after my diagnosis that two of her great-aunts had died of breast cancer,” Branch says. “She didn’t think it was important.”

Branch and her cousins have all decided that such a reluctance to talk about cancer was not going to continue in their families, and today, all the cousins and children are aware that breast and colon cancer are in their family history. She imparts the importance of sharing such information with the women she speaks to in her advocacy work.

Branch began advocating for women shortly after her own diagnosis by volunteering with Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organization (now called the Breast Cancer Network of Strength) and the National Breast Cancer Coalition. She graduated from the NBCC’s Project LEAD and began an outreach program for

African American women in the County of San Diego. She has participated in five peer reviews for the Department of Defense Breast Cancer Research Program, is currently a peer reviewer for Susan G. Komen for the Cure, and serves as a member of the University of California San Francisco's Breast SPORE Advocacy Core. She is on the board of directors of Breast Cancer Action and the Virginia Breast Cancer Foundation. In addition, she serves on the national advisory council for the Silent Spring Institute, an organization that builds partnerships between scientists, physicians, and public health and community advocates to identify and break links between the environment and women's health (especially breast cancer).

Branch has also become an advocate for health care reform, speaking at the White House in October about the three years she spent without health insurance after her husband lost his job and became a consultant.

"He got insurance for himself and our son who was still at home, but they wouldn't cover me and they wouldn't tell me why," she says. "I had no recourse because they didn't say outright that it was because I had had breast cancer, they just said no."

She has attended SABCS for 11 years and is serving a three-year term on the National Cancer Institute Director's Consumer Liaison Group.

Now a grandmother of four, Branch says on her next trip to Capitol Hill she will be accompanied by her 5-year-old granddaughter, Sage, who will begin the next generation of activists in the Branch family.

This article is a part of CURE's 2009 San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium coverage. To read more articles from SABCS 2009, visit sabcs2009.curetoday.com.