

PEOPLE

From Secrecy to Advocacy

BY JEAN N. JOHNSON

Actor Richard Roundtree leaves his macho mark on a pink-ribbon world.

In the late 1990s, veteran actor Richard Roundtree took a part playing a bare-knuckle fighter on TV's *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, in which a scene required him to be shirtless. Blaming cold temperatures during the shooting, he persuaded the director to let him wear an undershirt.

In truth, he says, he didn't want everyone to see his scar.

Roundtree, 64, had been diagnosed with breast cancer in 1993 after discovering a lump in his right breast. He was able to work as an actor almost immediately after treatment. But the man who was propelled to icon level for his 1970s portrayal of fearless superdetective Shaft regrets the method he used to stay employed.



Richard Roundtree, as Shaft, in 1971

He kept his cancer a secret for several years, and that was the wrong thing to do, he says now. "I was afraid I'd lose my job."

The actor-survivor has become a national spokesman for male breast cancer since he unexpectedly "came out of the closet" eight years ago. He has since partnered with the Susan G. Komen Foundation (now called Susan G. Komen for the Cure) and continues to speak out.

"Hindsight is a wonderful thing. I wish I had had the courage to be open immediately," Roundtree said earlier this year from Los Angeles after completing work on the Hallmark Channel miniseries *Final Approach*.

During his cancer treatment, he remembers mostly the fear of losing work if the truth were to come out. He would hide facts during the physical exams that actors must undergo. (He experienced only minor hair loss during treatment.)

About five years after his diagnosis, Roundtree spontaneously disclosed his illness at an annual celebrity golf benefit in Wilmington, South Carolina. The tournament was raising money for awareness and promoting free mobile screenings. As a participant, he got caught up in a discussion about the screenings and blurted, "Being a breast cancer survivor, I know what early detection means."

The instant his story was out, he became a symbol. A *Nightline* appearance and *People* magazine interview, for starters, created an immediate stir.

“Men and their wives came from everywhere telling me how I helped them come out of denial, saved their lives. The reaction told me this was something I needed to talk about.”

Roundtree likes talking because it keeps cancer awareness on the front burner. It helps to have celebrity status, he says, pointing to the more recent, high-profile case of former Massachusetts Sen. Edward Brooke, who in 2002 was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 82.

As a spokesman for the disease symbolized by the pink ribbon, Roundtree readily singles out the misconception that men don't get breast cancer.

“It bugs me that the male population in this disease is ignored. Sure, numbers are small, but men and their families need to be aware.”

The numbers can't be ignored. This year, Komen predicts that breast cancer will be diagnosed in 2,030 men, a spike from last year's predicted 1,720, and 450 will die from it. A projected 178,480 women will receive the diagnosis, a drop from 212,920 in 2006.

Before cancer, Roundtree was a health nut, feeling great, and in tune with his body. The day he located the knot in his right breast he immediately knew something was wrong. “Men don't get lumps in their breast,” he was thinking at the time. He was tempted to ignore it.

“Like most of my male counterparts, I didn't like going to the doctor. Men have this cavalier attitude about health. We take care of our cars, but our *health*? That can *wait*?”

After the diagnosis he turned to the one person he knew he could. “My Dad and I were very close. I called him, and he said, ‘Don't worry about it. Me and my Buddy [God] will take care of it.’ ”

That message gave him strength and courage, he says. “Overused terms, I know, but believing you can be cured is absolutely essential to survival.” After a mastectomy and chemotherapy, Roundtree was cancer-free.

Cancer patients need someone to talk to, he says. Keeping his diagnosis among family was safe. He feared repercussions from the entertainment industry if his condition were made public.

The industry had been good to him. Since his 1993 diagnosis, he's had a steady roll of television guest appearances and recurring parts. Recently he has appeared on ABC-TV's *Grey's Anatomy*, as doctor Dad to Dr. Preston Burke (Isaiah Washington), and as grandfather and prestigious judge on ABC Family's *Lincoln Heights*. He's in excellent health, doesn't look his age, maintains a spirited disposition, and fills a character actor persona that is much in demand: black, well-educated, older baby boomer authority figure.

Richard Roundtree, with Sandra Oh, on ABC's Grey's Anatomy.

Survivors tell Roundtree their stories about losing employment or being cut off by insurance coverage. That kind of panic shouldn't exist, but he can relate, he says.

Even after a clean bill of health, TV and movie companies still insisted that Roundtree get another opinion.

"It's all about educating the public," he says, adding that employers should be more understanding. "Nobody should be forced to lie."

Education is the key for patients and communities as strides continue in research, awareness, and early detection. Breast cancer survival rates among women have increased by about 50 percent since 1999, according to Komen. "You don't have to die," Roundtree says.

He relentlessly talks about early detection. "Screenings and annual checkups should be a regular part of health regimens. Make your doctor your friend. Maintain annual physicals. ... No excuse."

He walks the walk, too. "Last year I went in scared to death of the colonoscopy. Next thing I knew, 30 minutes later, I was coming out smiling, not feeling a thing."