

## Patricia Flowers

The month of October is my favorite time of the year. I love autumn. The weather changes, the temperatures are cooler, and God gives us a beautiful canvas of the leaves changing colors. Not to mention all of the fairs and outdoor festivals, and the FOOD (I love to eat)! At the same time, the month of October is also Breast Cancer Awareness Month. And for that reason, this time of year is a little bittersweet. October is the birth month of my mother, who died from breast cancer in 1978, when I was only 5 years old. So on her birth date, when I celebrate her life, I'm reminded of her death. I'm reminded of her death, more so now, because I was diagnosed with the same disease that claimed her life. It is the same disease that continues to claim so many lives.

According to an estimation by Susan G. Komen, there will be over 240,000 invasive breast cancer diagnoses in 2016 in the United States alone, with about 1% of those cases being men. In 2016, about 40,450 women and 440 men will die from breast cancer. I had always been aware of the statistics and made lifestyle choices to reduce my risks of developing breast cancer, given the history of breast cancer in my family. However, I really didn't process all of these numbers, statistics and data until I was faced with a diagnosis. In the summer of 2014, I was going through life as normal. I was a 7-month newlywed, we were moving into a bigger home, and we were celebrating our son getting accepted to medical school. Life was good. Then, in June of 2014, I felt a lump in my right breast an axillary (armpit). A mammogram and ultrasound revealed that the lump was a mass, not a cyst. The mass and the lymph node were biopsied. On July 14, 2014, I got the phone call and heard the words, "You have cancer." No matter how many times you try not to imagine how difficult it must be to hear those words, you'll never really know or fully understand the big ball of emotions you feel, unless you hear your name attached to the beginning or end of that sentence. "Dr. Flowers, you have cancer." I immediately went into "faith mode". I knew I had no choice but to beat it.

My cancer was diagnosed as Stage II invasive ductal carcinoma, and I learned that I was also a previvor and had inherited the BRCA 2 gene mutation from my mother. This information helped me decide my best treatment options. After picking my surgical and oncological team, I went through several surgeries and treatments that included: bilateral mastectomy and lymphectomy, placement of expanders, 16 weeks of chemotherapy, 33 radiation treatments, a total abdominal hysterectomy and bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy, and placement of permanent breast implants. The histology of my lymph nodes, after they were removed, changed the staging of my cancer from stage II to stage III. During the course of my treatments, I was in pain and extremely fatigued. As a result of the chemotherapy, I lost my hair, developed "chemo brain", lost my sense of taste, and developed thrush (a yeast infection) in my mouth and throat, causing me to lose 25 pounds as a result of not being able to eat, because it hurt so much to swallow. I also developed a blood clot in my arm, causing me to take Coumadin and give myself lovenox shots in my stomach.

My journey as a breast cancer survivor is not unlike the many stories I have heard among my survivor sisters (and brothers). However, while there can be so many similarities, for the most part, everyone's journey is different. Your medical team, your treatment plan, your support system, your thoughts and emotions, and your level of faith can all be different. However, the one thing that holds true for everyone is that cancer doesn't care who you are. Cancer doesn't care about your gender, your race/ethnicity, your age, your education, your occupation, your socioeconomic status (rich, poor, middle class), your political views, your relationships (wife, mother, daughter, sister, grandmother, aunt... or a

father), your religion or your faith. Cancer didn't care that my mother was a school teacher who had a husband and two young daughters who needed her. Cancer didn't care that I had a PhD, was a newlywed with a new home, and a son going to medical school. Cancer came for me, and it can come for anyone.

As an African-American woman and a breast cancer survivor with a history of breast cancer in my family, I understand the importance of early detection through education and yearly screenings. Also, my yearly mammograms were covered by my insurance company. However, not all African-Americans have the same story. The incidence of breast cancer is lower in African-American women compared to their non-Hispanic white counterparts, yet the mortality rate is higher in African-American women by comparison. This disparity can be addressed and easily decreased in underrepresented populations with the right programs in place to provide resources and increase awareness. This is exactly the goal of "Shades of Hope", the African-American Outreach Committee (AAOC) at Susan G. Komen Northwest North Carolina (NWNC). This is why I became involved with Susan G. Komen and the Shades of Hope, and currently serve as the secretary of the committee.

A key mission of the AAOC is to educate communities with a higher population of African-Americans on ways to lower their risks of developing breast cancer or breast cancer recurrence by focusing on healthier diets, cessation of tobacco use, regular exercise, low to moderate intake of alcohol, knowing your normal, and yearly mammogram screenings. We stress that early detection is key, and invite people to empower themselves with knowledge by asking your health care providers questions and attending information sessions and community events. The AAOC also provides information and resources about programs that can assist in implementing health screenings and mammograms, and supply quality of life items (wigs, scarves, mastectomy bras, etc.) to help patients cope during and after surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation treatments. Members of the AAOC are visible in the community, providing a presence, and making our mission known. The AAOC at Susan G. Komen NWNC is "reaching, teaching, and empowering African-American communities within our 22-county service area through breast health education initiatives involving collaboration with identified resources." The AAOC is just one of the MANY committees and programs that are a part of Susan G. Komen NWNC. Through various initiatives such as Worship In Pink, Pink 4 Lunch, Mission Outreach, the Hispanic Outreach Committee, Race for the Cure, and the Faces of Breast Cancer... we are making a difference. This is why I volunteer with Susan G. Komen, and why I want to be a 2017 Face of Breast Cancer representative. I want to make a difference. I believe that because of my faith, I can inspire others with my story and my journey. I also believe that because of my occupational training as a biomedical researcher/scientist/teacher, I can help educate others about this disease. Education and promotion of early detection and lifestyle choices that help lower your risks of developing cancer, or a cancer recurrence, is the closest thing we have to a cure at this time. I am grateful to be a part of that process.