

Breast Cancer Awareness: A survivor's story

Written by Ivan Phifer, Staff Writer
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According to the website, www.breastcancer.org, about one in eight U.S. women (just under 12 percent) will develop invasive breast cancer over the course of a lifetime.

For African-American women breast cancer, it is the most common form of cancer.

Kathy Phifer, an eight year survivor of stage 3B breast cancer, was careful to take precautionary measures and underwent regular check-ups.

"I was one of those women who always got a mammogram every year," said Phifer. "I always went to scheduled appointments for my physical by my primary doctor."

But one year Phifer forgot to get her routine check-up.

"It just so happened that in 2004, I went to the doctor because I was feeling different. 2003 was when I was going to school and working. Sometimes you are so busy doing things you forget about your health," said Phifer.

After receiving a letter of abnormalities, Phifer went in to get re-tested with another biopsy and ultrasound. After the tests, she received the results and was told by her doctor, "You have breast cancer."

"To hear something like that is devastating, especially after I had just finished college," said Phifer. "I was happy (to finish college) because it was a goal I have been trying to accomplish for a long time. At the time I did not know what to do."

When Phifer spoke with her surgeon, she was informed the surgery to remove her breast was also to see how advanced was the cancer. "Even though the breast removal was same day surgery, I had to stay another day because I was nauseous. If you are nauseous they won't let you go," she said.

Thirty years ago, Phifer's mother had stomach cancer.

"When she was diagnosed she was in her 50s," said Phifer. "It spread to her brain, which limited

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her to five years of life after diagnosis." In addition, Phifer had an older sister who died of breast cancer in 2003.

"I know genetically it is in my family. You do not necessarily have to have a family member who has it, because it can skip a generation and I know my family is at high risk," said Phifer.

Breast cancer is designated in five stages. The stage at which Phifer was diagnosed was stage 3B.

Three-B is an invasive cancer where cancer can be of various sizes, spread to the chest wall as well as spreading to auxiliary lymph nodes, clumped together or sticking to other structures. Inflammatory breast cancer is considered stage 3B also, with signs including reddening of the skin, warm or swollen breast and cancer cells spread to lymph nodes and enter skin.

"After I returned home, that's when the real journey began," said Phifer.

One of the things that helped Phifer in her ordeal was the relationship she developed with her oncologist.

"That is the person who provides the chemotherapy treatments, and takes care of you for the next five months to make sure you do not become more nauseous, depressed and that your health is getting better, so you have to be close with them," said Phifer, the eight year survivor.

In addition to the oncologist, her husband was a key supporter in Phifer's recovery.

"My husband was there to support me. He had to be just as strong for me to even go through my chemotherapy treatments," said Phifer. "When you receive chemo you are there for four hours or more. To see people there for that long all by themselves, it looks so sad. You need that support."

Although there are five stages – stage zero counting as a stage – an additional stage called triple-negative breast cancer is also highly dangerous.

Triple negative refers to breast cancer cells testing negative for estrogen receptors, progesterone receptors. About 10-20 percent of breast cancers – more than one out of every 10 are found to be triple-negative. "That is one of the more critical stages for Black women," said Phifer.

After surgery and chemotherapy, Phifer was placed on Remedex for five years to keep the cancer at bay and make sure it does not return. As a high risk patient, she must return every six months to her oncologist, perform regular mammograms, and eat the right foods.

"I have to stay happy and live everyday like it's my last, because you never know," said Phifer. "Enjoy people, and their company. Even though it may be hard sometimes, you have to take things as they come and love everybody."

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For more information on breast cancer, causes, symptoms and treatments, visit www.breastcancer.org

Writer Ivan Phifer is the son of Kathy Phifer.