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Annette John-Hall | A friend's close call with a killer

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Sad but true – I'm no different from most folks when it comes to having a way-too-close cancer connection.

My dear friend Gloria Harper Dickinson has breast cancer. And not only does she have breast cancer, she has inflammatory breast cancer, one of the rarest and most aggressive kind.



Gloria Harper Dickinson's battle with inflammatory breast cancer doesn't keep her from the classroom at the College of New Jersey, where she teaches African American studies

Breast Cancer Awareness

Month ends tomorrow. But her awareness will last forever.

If anything, I foolishly thought my globe-trotting girlfriend could outdistance cancer. But it caught her last year in between trips to South Africa and Martha's Vineyard.

As we all too painfully realize, cancer isn't picky. And inflammatory cancer, once it attacks, takes no prisoners. It presents at Stage 3.

Gloria is one of the strongest women I know. But make no mistake, going through a year of chemotherapy, mastectomy and radiation was a harrowing ordeal, even if she did manage the treatments with minimal side effects.

Cancer has a cruel sense of humor. It was as though it reared back its ugly head and said, "OK, you're still standing after a left hook? Let's see if I can drop you with a one-two combination."

Barely a month after receiving a clean bill of health, Gloria was diagnosed with inflammatory cancer in her remaining breast.

"I was devastated," she says, back again undergoing treatment not far from her home in Willingboro. "I began to see these little red spots on my breast. Even when I wanted to believe it was something else, I knew I had to make an appointment.

"My doctors said they haven't seen anything like it."

But if you know anything about my pal – with a seemingly endless supply of energy as professor of African American studies at the College of New Jersey for more than 30 years; president of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History; and international regional director of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. – then you know that although the double dose of disease may have staggered her, she's far from being down for the count.

"I am trying to figure out the why," she says, like the researcher she is, in that deliberate way she has of speaking. "But the one thing I know I am supposed to do is get the information out."

So we talked – all weekend. I was destined to clear a path for her.

Inflammatory breast cancer accounts for only 1 to 5 percent of all breast-cancer cases in the United States, and is slightly more common in African American women. Odds for survival after five years have improved to 50 percent with recent advances.

"I had noticed a swelling, a redness, and it was sore," she says. "But I thought it was some kind of infection. I didn't think it was cancer because there was no lump."

She says she probably lost precious weeks with the internist – who gave her antibiotics at first – before ultimately seeing the breast surgeon, who determined what was really wrong.

It's dizzying enough to try to make life-and-death decisions about types of treatment once you're diagnosed with cancer. But trying to do the right thing when you're well can be frustrating, too.

Though Breast Cancer Awareness Month has led many women to schedule mammograms, it can take months to get in. I'm guessing there's not much of a wait time for men to get Viagra. Just saying . . .

Dr. Clare Bradley of the American Cancer Association, who is also part of a mammography task force for New York and New Jersey, says there just

aren't enough support staff – radiologists, nurse practitioners and others – to meet the demand. "We don't have enough slots in clinics for all the women who need mammograms, which relates to the longer waiting times."

So you wait months to have a mammogram, only to have it come back dirty.

What do you do?

Well, Gloria has spent a lot of time on her knees.

"Realistically, I spend a whole lot more time in church. The things you don't have time for, you make time for."

Saturday, we both spent time in prayer at Gloria's church in Burlington before going on to an annual luncheon for cancer survivors hosted by the Bread of Life Foundation.

Founded by breast-cancer survivor Lillie Daniels, Bread of Life is just one of many faith-based organizations that have helped Gloria cope.

Another faith-based group in Camden, Sister Will You Help Me, which supports women of color with breast cancer, led Gloria to her radiologist and her physical therapist. Gloria, who I swear invented networking, was so inspired she started a chapter in Willingboro.

For sure, she's not viewing her circumstances through rose-colored glasses. She understands all too well the mighty struggle ahead. But hope is a powerful weapon. And she has plenty of it, especially after she got the "good" news last week that her recurrence is a brand-new cancer, which, as wacky as it sounds, means the original treatment worked.

Still, she can't say it enough. If there's a single piece of advice she has for women – you know, the super-species that puts itself last, takes care of everyone else first, and stresses over it all – it's this: "If you see something that looks suspicious, go to the doctor."

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