

Breast cancer, one woman's struggle

Written by Eliz C. Dowdy, Special to the NNPA from the Precinct Reporter
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The Precinct Reporter sat down recently for a one-on one chat with Joshlyn Earls who has worn many hats, but is now in the toughest fight of her life—the battle with inflammatory breast cancer.

Earls has sold real estate; she was the first African American to sell residential real estate in Orange County. She and her husband Dennis opened a beauty distribution business where they developed the first low-odor acrylic product for nail sculpting and helped raise six children belonging to a family member, and did it all with sass. Now, Earls is bankrupt, disillusioned about the way her treatment options were handled and is reaching out to help others avoid the quicksand she traversed.

Pictured: Joshlyn Earls, founder of Fighting 4 The Tatas

Earls encountered difficulty swallowing her food; it was stopping in her chest region and she had to lightly pound the area to get it down, but tests showed nothing out of the ordinary. The medical community is sometimes quick to label women's issues as emotional, psychosomatic—it's all in your mind!

On May 26, 2011 Earls' world started rumbling and crumbling, as she absorbed the full impact of the doctor's words to her. The odyssey had begun in the summer of 2010 when Earls had visited a chiropractor. Because this was her first visit he ordered a full body digital picture that

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when viewed delineated an area of concern. He printed out the photo, gave it to her and suggested she visit an internist. The internist laughed at the possibility that a chiropractor could locate cancer with a digital picture, and ignored it. However in February 2011 while pulling a tee shirt over her head she noticed a tiny lump above the right nipple. She had an appointment for February 8, 2011 that had been made in December 2010. At the February 8 visit to her primary care physician, he ordered a mammogram, which was scheduled for March 16, 2011.

Now Earls is asking questions, pulling her medical records because she is now experiencing pain in the right breast. On May 16, 2011 she received the news that she indeed had high grade infiltrating ductal carcinoma. She informed her daughter and daughter-in-law, and they had started asking questions of their medical associates. On May 26, 2011 the ceiling fell when she marched into the doctor's office already aware of the fact that she had breast cancer but totally unprepared to hear him say, "put inflammatory in front of ductal carcinoma." It is a very rare form of breast cancer that is not detected by mammograms because there is no lump in the breast; the cancer cells travel in the ducts. As a woman of color the prognosis is grim; there are only three documented African American women alive who have inflammatory breast cancer. It is very aggressive—the survival rate is 40%—and instead of the five year life span afforded by other forms of breast cancer this type cuts that expectancy to 2 and 1/2 years. Earls had immediate removal of the right breast, high dosages of chemotherapy, radiation and endocrine therapy, which is basically chemotherapy in pill form.

Searching for answers why the death rate for African American is greater than the death rate for Caucasian women has led Earls and her daughter to start a non-profit organization, "Fighting 4 the Tatas." Since she lost her private health insurance, her business and home, she is acutely aware that cancer care must extend beyond just raising funds for research; that is important, but Earls is part of an email network of 1500 women with inflammatory breast cancer, and she is the only African American woman in the group.

Coping with a cancer diagnosis is devastating and frightening. Earls' purpose in raising up the organization is to function as a resource center, offering assistance with utilities, helping women to feel positive about the image that stares back from the mirror; knowing what questions to ask the doctor, getting their medical records, and the clinical notes the doctor wrote; all of these can determine whether they can qualify for assistance.

Because this type of cancer is lumpless, many younger women are dying from it, because by the time they are diagnosed it has taken full control of their bodies. These are all flaws Earls hopes to address for other women, as she continues to tread softly, determined to live. In addition to the disease, she is fighting the stereotype attributed to women of color, that is, that

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they don't get the life scans, they don't follow up etc. Earls states that at age sixty she was dutiful to get mammograms, was eating healthy, exercising regularly and keeping a positive attitude.

Interested individuals may contact Earls at: (909) 874-4709 or at info@fighting4thetatas.com.

Visit website: http://www.fighting4thetatas.org/Inflammatory_B.html