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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – When Kimberly Higginbotham was 23 years old, she received some devastating news.

It was January. Higginbotham was in her last year of graduate school for physical therapy at Howard University, but she wasn't feeling the same excitement as her peers. Instead, she was worried about the lump she had found in her breast.

After she found it, she began showing everyone she knew. She showed her mother. She showed her instructor in her physical therapy program. Even her boyfriend noticed as he went in for a hug and felt something between them.

Everyone told her the same thing: go to a doctor. Though she had just seen her gynecologist a month earlier, she took their advice.

"It's probably not cancer, wait until your next period to see if it goes away," she was told. If it went away, she would be fine. If it didn't, she would need a surgeon to perform a biopsy.

Higginbotham waited and felt, waited and felt. She told her doctor the lump had gotten smaller after her first period, but a month later it was still there. Everyone was convinced it wasn't cancer. She was too young, they said. Besides, there was no history of cancer in her family.

With her mother at her side, Higginbotham was told the tissue they removed came back positive with malignant cells.

"I knew malignant meant cancer. I knew the tissue came from my breast, but I thought, at 23 years old, there's no way in the world that he's telling me I have breast cancer," Higginbotham said.

So she asked: "Does that mean I have breast cancer?"

“Yes,” her surgeon replied.

Higginbotham immediately began to cry. Instead of thinking about marching across a stage at graduation, her mind was filled with less pleasant thoughts of chemotherapy, hair loss, and sickness..

At 23, her life changed forever as she began moving along a path all-too-familiar for hundreds thousands of women across the country.

Approximately, 230,480 new cases of breast cancer were diagnosed last year in women, resulting in nearly 40,000 deaths. October has been designated Breast Cancer Awareness Month. For Kimberly, 2012 marks the 14th year that she’s been cancer free. But many African American women are not as fortunate.

Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer and the second-most fatal cancer among Black women, according to the Susan G. Komen Foundation. The incidence rate among African American women is lower than that of their White counterparts. From 2003-2007, there were 114 women were diagnosed for every 100,000 or 6 percent lower than that of White women. However, in that same period African American women had a 39 percent higher death rate from breast cancer.

Black women also have a higher incidence rate before 40 years of age and are more likely to die from breast cancer at every age. Breast cancer mortality is 41 percent higher among Black women than White females.

According to a recent study conducted by the Avon Foundation in partnership with the Sinai Urban Health Institute, the disparities in mortality between Black and White women are largely attributable to societal factors such as socioeconomic status and access to health care.

Dr. Sara Horton, the chief of the division of oncology and hematology at Howard University Hospital, observed, “A big component of it is socio-economic barriers, because of income and where you live things including access to healthcare become a barrier in terms of getting care or screening.”

The authors of the Avon and Sinai Institute study noted that if Black women were getting screened and following up with mammograms regularly, their risk of dying from cancer would be significantly reduced.

However, Dr. Horton notes that even when they are screened, Black women are being diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer, a much more aggressive and often fatal form of the disease.

“There is a higher incidence of triple negative cancer in African American and younger women, but we don’t have the answer to why certain women have certain types of breast cancer,” said Horton. “The most important thing to understand is that breast cancer can be very curable if it is caught early. Breast cancer is not a death sentence.”

“Prevention is the best way to fight it,” Horton said. “Doing things like talking about cancer, being aware, talking to family members, eating a plant heavy diet, smoking cessation – all these things can lead to prevention if they’re done early.”

Kimberly Higginbotham, who now works as a patient navigator at Howard University’s Cancer Center, realizes that her self-awareness may have saved her life.

“You have to investigate and know your body, “ she said. “You only go to the doctor about once every six months, but you’re with your body every day.”

Fostering Survivorship

Another aspect of life with breast cancer Kimberly and Horton take seriously is fostering survivorship, an idea that 19-year survivor and advocate Karen Jackson used to develop a network of breast cancer survivors.

Her national organization, Sisters Network, Inc., sistersnetworkinc.org, seeks to provide support and resources to women in the African American community throughout their battle with breast cancer.

Jackson and the Sisters Network seek to “Stop the Silence,” as one of their main campaigns claims, a slogan that speaks to her early experiences with receptiveness about breast cancer among Black women.

“As I would go around from city to city I found it very difficult to speak to issues because the community was not receptive, no one was really interested in hearing the message and early detection was not something deemed as necessary,” Jackson said.

Over the years, Jackson has seen the outreach climate better, and more and more organizations join the fight to keep black women alive after a battle with breast cancer.

“You get through your treatment and then your journey begins,” Jackson said. “We continuously promote the message of health as a top priority, but if you’re diagnosed support is a necessity.”

Kimberly Higginbotham agrees.

“People think after treatment you go back to your life as normal,” she said. “But life does change. You need someone in your corner rooting you on.”