

Survivor tells breast cancer patients to 'embrace' the disease

by [Monica Derevjanik](#)

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For Angela Walker, kitchens have always had a special meaning.

Her grandmother's Englewood kitchen served as a creative space that would later inspire her to pursue a culinary career. Thirty years later, the kitchen at Chicago's Park Hyatt was where Walker discovered that she might have breast cancer.

"I was working in the kitchen and one day I was getting ready for work and I was doing what I call spot checks—not just a regular breast self examination, but just touchy-feely kind of stuff," she said. "And I found a lump in my armpit."

The then 34-year-old cook soon found out her worst nightmare was true. Cancer surgeon Dr. Roseanne Krinski, of St. James Health Center in Olympia Fields, diagnosed Walker with infiltrating ductal carcinoma, a type of invasive breast cancer. In Walker's case, the tumor had started to invade her lymphatic system.

"At that moment I can honestly say that I had an out-of-body experience. I truly saw myself from the head down. I saw Dr. Krinski to my left and a gentleman on my right and the fluorescent lights at the top of the examination room. And then I felt the warmth of the tears on my cheeks, and I was just like, 'This is not happening.' And then I just had this shock of myself coming back into myself and I looked down at Dr. Krinski's feet and said, 'Cute shoes,' because at that point, it was just like what's the next step?"

The next step consisted of a 9-month-long treatment, which included chemotherapy, a lumpectomy and radiation.

Nevertheless, Walker made the best of those months in 2006.

"At the time of my diagnosis, I was technically single, never been pregnant, so I called that nine months my spiritual pregnancy. I gave birth to this whole new life that I know is destined by God."

She even returned as a cook at the Park Hyatt, despite the effects of using Lupron—a medication that temporarily takes the female hormone estrogen out of the patient's system—in addition to the treatment.

"I would stand on the line and next thing you know, I would feel the heat—hot flashes. Oh my goodness, I would have to rip my hat off my head and that sweat would just pour off. It was unbelievable."

But Walker's emotions during that time were equally as distressing as her physical problems.

“I kept a journal, actually, and I have my timeline of my treatments and my thoughts on any given day,” she said. “I looked back at that book, and I was just like, ‘Wow, it’s prophetic, and it’s dark, and it’s scary, and I can’t believe that I was in that place.’”

But by July 2006, Walker received the good news: the chemotherapy dissolved the entire tumor and she was cancer free.

“I just said, ‘Hallelujah!’” she added.

Despite her cancer-free status, Walker couldn’t forget her turbulent journey.

“I’m sure at first Angela was upset about her diagnosis,” said Walker’s older sister, Carlene. “However, I’m sure that she now knows that her misery has become her ministry.”

Walker shares her testimony everywhere she goes, Carlene added. She encourages women to receive testing and to have valuable information about breast health.

“I want people to see me as a God-fearing, spiritual woman who is trying to save some black women, some Latina women, some poor women from this disease. So don’t see me as an organization—see me as a purpose.”

This need to educate women about cancer led Walker to become a health initiatives representative for the American Cancer Society. She began working for the organization in May 2008.

“When I interviewed, I was asked how much I knew about the American Cancer Society,” Walker said. “And I said, ‘From my perspective, I think that it’s seen as an old, white man’s organization.’ And the vice president actually agreed. A lot of people know about the brand name for the organization, but not about what they do. So my focus is to make sure that the community knows what we do.”

Since joining the American Cancer Society and the Metropolitan Chicago Breast Cancer Task Force—a coalition of breast cancer activists—she has had the opportunity to work alongside state legislators to promote better breast cancer health care.

“Legislation, resources, educational opportunities, treatment opportunities—everything has progressed,” Walker said. “But at the same time, there’s that disconnect. We have cultural issues, we have education issues, we have system issues, we have trust issues within the health care system and we have women that are being treated unfairly in the system.”

In the summer of 2008, she testified in Springfield regarding the Reducing Breast Cancer Disparities Act. The law, signed by Gov. Patrick Quinn in March, aims to improve breast cancer care by allowing easier access to breast cancer treatments and screenings for low-income, minority women.

"She was really young when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, but I've seen her really take this as a personal path and a personal mission," said Janice Phillips, an oncology nurse researcher at the University of Chicago Medical Center. "I think she's an excellent example, using her own experience and using it to make sure that young women understand that they are not off the hook when it comes to breast cancer."

Walker's main goal is to make sure the bill isn't forgotten.

"Just because a law is signed, it doesn't mean that it will be [carried out]," she said. "We know how politics work in terms of funding and roadblocks, so hopefully it's an opportunity for us to get as much information out to the women as possible to say that this is another piece of help out there for you."

Now, at 37, Walker is working full time as a breast cancer educator through the American Cancer Society, the breast cancer task force and the Greater Roseland Task Force in south suburban Dolton.

Despite working for three different organizations, she has one important message for those diagnosed with breast cancer:

"You can't wish it away. If it's going to happen, it's going to happen, but at the same time, don't be crippled by fear. Embrace it if it happens to you and seek out the resources that are available to you."



Monica Derevjanik/MEDILL

Survivor Angela Walker addresses breast cancer survivors, advocates and state representatives about the Reducing Breast Cancer Disparities Act in March.



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As a health initiatives representative at the American Cancer Society, Walker focuses on educating people about cancer.