Chronicles of Hope: Rebecca West

The Chronicles of Hope are the *real life* stories of those helped by Susan G. Komen for the Cure's commitment to the care, research and understanding of breast cancer. These are their—and our—stories.

Survivor **A. Rebecca West**

Years of Survivorship **5**

Rev. A. Rebecca West is a charismatic leader and pastor in her community who wasn't about to let breast cancer stand in her way. After a series of benign biopsies, she found yet another lump in her left breast. She recalls, "I knew it was different and I wanted to do whatever I needed to do right away, because I was tired of it." Because a needle biopsy was inconclusive, she had a surgical biopsy on September 16, 2005, the day of her 64th birthday. In addition to her modified, radical mastectomy, Rev. West had 15 lymph nodes removed, 12 of which were cancerous, radiation and eight rounds of chemotherapy.

There was a brochure at Howard University Cancer Center that advertised the patient navigation services offered at Smith Farm Center for Healing and the Arts. Patient navigation is a collection of services to help patients "navigate," or find their ways, through the healthcare system. Depending on the organization, services can range from help with insurance claims to help with coordinating services with doctors and hospitals. Rev. West read the brochure, but didn't give it much thought.

Later, a navigator from Smith Farm stopped in and spoke with her about the various programs available. Rev. West recalls, "I thought it was a nice thing, but it wasn't for me because I had good insurance, I'm a pastor and I have a very supportive family so I had more support than most people would want or need…" She laughs as she reflects, "so I just didn't think I needed it." Then, just prior to the fourth round of her chemotherapy, Rev. West's white blood count fell so low that she couldn't take the treatment. She remembered that Smith Farm offered a cooking class on how to boost your immune system and she signed up in an effort to get her white blood count up.

While she was being treated for breast cancer, Rev. West also experienced a period of tremendous personal loss. Again, she turned to Smith Farm and found a retreat for cancer patients and their families. The week was filled with sessions on how to care for yourself—from eating, to painting, group discussions and writing. Rev. West reports that it was "one of the best retreats…to explore and talk about what was going on in your life."

Unfortunately, toward the end of the week, Rev. West's white blood count dropped again and she had to be hospitalized. It

"I think the most important thing you can tell someone who has just been told that she has breast cancer is that she does not have to do it alone. There are trained people who can help her through the process. They are known as navigators and usually they are in your community and

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was at that time that she really experienced the full gamut of the care and dedication of the navigators from Smith Farm. Someone took her to the emergency room and stayed with her until she was settled. Navigators brought lunch to her, visited her in the hospital and called her at home after she was discharged.

When asked to become a navigator at Smith Farm in late 2007, Rev. West seized the opportunity because she says, "I come in contact with people who don't have the kind of insurance that I have and when you are down and you have to walk through the maze, it can be very difficult." She completed several training sessions and now attends a monthly meeting with other navigators from Smith Farm.

"Rebecca is a remarkable survivor and pioneer in faith-based community navigation."
- Carole O'Toole

To date, Rev. West has assisted approximately 20 breast cancer patients, as well as many others with different cancer diagnoses. As a navigator, she has driven patients to appointments, helped with insurance education, directed people to facilities that offer free mammograms and provided workshops for nutrition, exercise, meditation and more.

Carole O'Toole, Director of Navigation Programs at Smith Farm, is grateful for Rev. West's work saying, "She has reached out especially to her community's senior citizens, and has been tireless in her efforts to educate and inform women of the reality of breast cancer in our city and the support that can be found in patient navigation services and in integrative cancer care resources at Smith Farm Center. Her passion and energy in educating the community and assisting women with breast cancer is boundless!"

KOMEN'S INVESTMENT IN PATIENT NAVIGATION

The Komen Affiliate network recognizes the need for patient navigation programs and provides support for programs, training, certification and funding of navigators. Collectively, Komen Affiliates have funded over 1400 grants totaling more than $88M for navigation efforts nationwide. In the last two years alone, 300 grants, exceeding $21M in patient navigation were awarded.

Smith Farm has received seven grants from Komen since 1997 totaling more than $1.2M. Ms. O'Toole reports that Komen grants have, "allowed us, through our Academic Partnership Grant, to reach over 8,000 underserved residents of Washington, D.C., where we offer education and outreach programs in breast health and breast cancer treatment, wellness workshops in nutrition, exercise and stress reduction, and discussions on navigation and cancer care."

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