Women working to ‘knock out’ breast cancer

Contributed by WINSLOW M. MASON JR.
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MIAMI — A knock on the door saved Jewel Lambert’s life. The knock came from volunteers with the Women’s Breast Health Initiative. They were canvasing the Miami Gardens’ neighborhood where Lambert’s mother lives, urging low-income women to get screened for breast cancer and, above all, urge others to get tested. Lambert’s mother completed her breast cancer screening. She was fine.

But when Lambert got tested after her mother’s urging, she learned she was near stage three for Breast Cancer. Stage four is probable death.

“When something like that happens to you, you know you have no choice but to go out and help others,” said Lambert, who got her Breast Cancer under control with the help of doctors.

Now, Lambert is at the forefront of a new initiative aimed at saving the lives of hundreds of other low-income women.Volunteers with the Women’s Breast Health Initiative in Miami Lakes are unveiling a groundbreaking new awareness campaign in the fight against Breast Cancer and Heart Disease.

The initiative, called “One in Three, One in Eight,” will be introduced during WBHI’s annual “Open The Door” reception on May 10th at the Hotel & Resort Turnberry Isle Miami in Aventura. The new campaign, which launched in February, shares the daunting statistics about breast cancer and heart disease through a bold graphic featuring eight women of various backgrounds and professions. The third woman in the graphic is highlighted in red to symbolize her death from heart disease; the eighth woman is highlighted in pink to symbolize her breast cancer diagnosis.The campaign is the brainchild of Andrea Ivory, founder and CEO of WBHI, a nonprofit 501(c)3, grassroots, voluntary organization dedicated to educating women about the importance of breast and heart health by providing them with the resources to beat the disease through mammograms, education, screenings, and nutrition.

MORE VIGILANCE

“The reality is one in three women will die from heart disease,” Ivory said. “One in eight will be diagnosed with breast cancer. These two diseases combined are taking countless women each year. As a result, we must be even more vigilant in our efforts.” According to researchers at the Winship Cancer Institute of Emory University, a significant proportion of women with breast cancer have one or more risk factors for heart disease at the time of breast cancer diagnosis that further increase the risk of cardio toxicity, including smoking, obesity, lack of activity and high cholesterol.

Additionally, if a woman had radiation therapy on the area of the body that includes the heart, there may be an increased risk of cardio myopathy, coronary artery disease and heart attack. The combination of radiation and chemotherapy can further increase a woman’s risk of heart damage. After second malignancies, heart disease is the leading cause of longterm morbidity and mortality among breast cancer survivors, according to researchers.

Ivory, a breast cancer survivor herself, started WBHI in 2005 after realizing that far too many low-income women were losing their lives because they couldn’t afford the health insurance that would give them access to free mammograms or other health care.

Since that time, more than 4,000 volunteers have knocked on more than 10,000 households, conducting one on one outreach about the risks of breast cancer. This year, volunteers will be armed with information about breast cancer and heart disease, now that they understand the critical connection between the two diseases.

“Don’t be the One. Help us save the One. That’s in essence our message,” says Ivory. “In our new campaign, we want to drive home that message in a very visible way. We can fight both breast and heart disease. Early detection and a healthy lifestyle is the key to saving lives.”

Paolo Rodriguez, 26, a resident of Aventura, is a volunteer coordinator with WBHI. She lost her cousin to breast cancer. Her cousin, not yet 40, died and left four children, the youngest of them 7.

“A family was left without a mom because she didn’t know how to save her life. We have to break down those barriers that keep some women in the dark about their own health.”

Monica Massillon, 34, a volunteer coordinator with WBHI who joined the organization when its outreach focused only on breast health, said combining outreach for breast cancer and heart disease will reach even more women.

“We have additional questions that are focused more on heart health. We also have nurses from local hospitals to take blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Some of these women have never ever had a mammogram. They are so grateful when they see us at the door. Since they can’t get access to health care, they’re so happy that the healthcare is coming to them.”

PARTNERSHIPS

WBHI is in partnership with Jackson Health System, Memorial Health Care System, Baptist Health System and Mount Sinai of Miami Dade and Broward County, Ivory said.

It’s through partnerships with volunteers and the medical community that Ivory launched WBHI. She says she hopes to grow the organization so that every woman, regardless of income, will have access to adequate health care and information.“This is my life’s work,” Ivory said. “We’re trying to become an evidence-based model so that we can demonstrate the effect of doing this kind of community outreach. What we can do to circumvent mortality in this population is limitless. I can’t wait to take this work to Philadelphia, my hometown, as well as other areas of the country where there is a high concentration of working class women who can’t afford health care.” It begins with a knock on the door, she said. “We’re saving lives, one door at a time.”

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