



Sentinel-Voice photo by Lés Pierres Streater

(L to R) Jeannie Beatty, Hattie Bailey and Cathy Presley are part of Sisters Network, Inc.

Cancer survivors group focuses on Black women

By Lés Pierres Streater
Sentinel-Voice

The American Cancer Society estimated 20,000 African-American women would be diagnosed with breast cancer this year and 5,700 of those new patients will die.

While death may be inevitable for some, a national organization made up primarily of breast cancer survivors is dedicated to making a difference by educating African-American women about this silent killer. Founded in 1994, Sisters Network, Inc., has 44 chapters and more than 4,000 members nationwide.

The local chapter, led by Jeannie Beatty, meets every third Friday at Victory Baptist Church, 500 W. Monroe. Women who participate in the group receive encouragement and knowledge, said Beatty who has been in remission for 14 years.

"Our mission is to educate and support Black women suffering from breast cancer. We want to let them know that there are ways that their lives can be saved from this disease. Many of our Black women are dying from this disease and we are here to help them realize that there are options available to prevent dying." Medical research shows breast cancer is the most common cancer among African-American women. Lung cancer trails in second place. Beatty advocates for women to take ownership of their bodies.

"We have information available for Black women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer to take better care of themselves. They can get free mammograms, pap smears, and a referral to a physician if they are found

positive. We will escort them to the examination, along with providing support to speak to their family members about the disease if they are afraid or unable to communicate with them," Beatty said.

Local chapter members teach women about breast cancer, outreach, advocacy training and resources to treat the disease, because a lack of knowledge about different methods of treatment for the various stages of cancer (from zero to four) can be detrimental to a patient's outcome.

As an example, Beatty spoke about warning signs that many women experience after radiation but most Black women don't experience. She said she retained radiation in her body after treatments and suffered internal burning that lead to an adjustment of the treatment for her that is completely different than that for White women. She suggests that any African-American woman undergoing radiation and/or chemotherapy make sure that the treatment is re-adjusted to allow for the melanin in her skin. This step can potentially reduce the chance of retaining heat in the body and suffering internal burning or unnecessary darkening of the skin.

Early detection is key to surviving breast cancer and a defense that doctors tout. Beatty encourages women to begin examining their breasts as young as 16, or when they experience their first menstrual cycle, rather than waiting until 40 to have their first mammogram. This way, a girl becomes more in tune with her body.

"Breast cancer is a silent killer and you have to take ownership of your body,"

Beatty said.

In a Nevada State Health Division report on cancer from 1997-2001 — the most recent data available — there were 6,420 cases of breast cancer. Of those, 1,195 people died proving a mortality rate of one out of every 5.2 cases.

During that period, African-American women accounted for 332 new breast cancer patients with 278 of them residing in Clark County. The mortality rate of African-American women in Clark County during this time period was 72 cases. The median age of African-American women in Nevada diagnosed with breast cancer was 59.

The report found that African-American women in Nevada have the lowest one-year post-surgery/treatment survival rate of any racial or ethnic group (81 percent), and the lowest five-year survival rate at 67 percent. Also, 90 percent of women with only a high school education or lower were less likely to ever have a mammogram or breast exam, when compared to post high school and college graduates — both averaging 96 percent.

Las Vegas Sisters Network members know all too well the disease and the outside factors facing African-American women. Member Cathy Presley was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001.

"I discovered a lump in my breast. When I went to the doctor, she told me that it could possibly be a cyst because it was mobile, but if it were stationary we would do a biopsy. After a month or two, I had a biopsy and it was a tumor that had to be removed. It was tough and

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