



## One Hundred Reasons to Live: The Story of a Liberian Cancer Survivor

(Jun 2, 2008) By: Wynfred Russell

Maimah Karmo had one goal: To make sure her young daughter, Noelle, didn't grow up motherless. Her next concern was whether she would live long enough to help others by telling her story.

When young Maimah and her parents left Monrovia in 1989 for the United States, just as Liberia was about to be plunged into a devastating civil war, little did she know that in the future she would be experiencing a different type of struggle.

Maimah was only 32 years old, and a new mother, when her ordeal began in February 2006. She discovered a lump in her breast while taking a shower and visited her doctor to investigate. Although the lump was hard, the mammogram showed that it appeared to be a cyst. Attempts to aspirate the lump failed, because it was very hard. The physical properties of the lump, as doctors tried to aspirate seemed to tell another story.



Maimah & Noelle (Daughter)

The doctor told Maimah she was too young for the lump to be cancerous. There was no family history of cancer. Plus, she was still in childbearing years. This reassured her that women at that age tend to have lumpier breasts. Unsatisfied and trusting her instincts, Maimah chose to get a second opinion.

Six months later, a new diagnosis revealed “invasive ductal carcinoma” (an aggressive stage II breast cancer). Maimah's new doctor immediately entered her into a robust treatment protocol, including chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Today, she is happy to learn from her doctor that her cancer is still in remission.

"While undergoing treatment, when I looked into my daughter's eyes, I had to fight to be around to take care of her," says the single mother. "I realized that my daughter was too important to me to just give up. Cancer is a horrible experience, it is not pleasant. But, I am glad I have been given a second chance - a new lease on life."

Her second goal now is to educate women all over the world about the disease, because 80 percent of women who get breast cancer have no history of cancer in their family.

"The risk factors other than environmental is just being a woman and having a breast," Maimah adds.

Maimah, now a public speaker and advocate, offers this simple plea: “Do your monthly self-examination and get your annual physical examination. If you find a lump, have a family history or notice irregularities in your breast (such as discharge or abnormal color, dimpling or puckering), ask your doctor for a mammogram.”



“There is no face to breast cancer; it is neither an older woman nor a black

woman's disease or more prevalent with women of any race, age or ethnic background. It does not discriminate," she stresses.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosis among African American women, and among women nationwide. But, Black women are more likely than White women to be diagnosed at later stages of the disease and are more likely to die from it. Younger women also have more aggressive breast cancers and higher mortality rates than their older peers.

"Younger women need to be aware of these risks," says Maimah.

However, many medical studies now show that mammograms are not 100% reliable.

A breast cancer and women's rights advocate, Maimah says her faith in God kept her hopes high in battling the excruciating pain associated with cancer and going through her treatment regimen. She lost all her hair and developed scarring in her lungs as a result of the radiation, some of the long-term side effects of cancer treatment.

"After my diagnosis, I struggled to understand what it all meant. At the end of my second chemotherapy treatment, I had a talk with God and told him that, I would dedicate my entire life to him and spreading the word about this disease".

Maimah is keeping her promise.

She is the founder and president of Tigerlily Foundation, a breast cancer advocacy organization. The organization is based in Reston, Virginia. Maimah is a candidate for the MBA degree at the University of Maryland – College Park.

Maimah is also the Editorial Director of "Global Woman Magazine", a global publication addressing issues that affect international women, including: breast cancer, female genital mutilation, fistula, domestic violence, and lung cancer. She has been featured on ABC's "Good Morning America", Fox Channel 5, News Channel 8 and numerous newspapers and radio interviews. She was featured in Essence Magazine, and will appear in two international women's publications in fall 2008.

"Maimah zest for life is contagious! Her personal odyssey gives her a powerful platform from which to share her empowering messages; but what I love most about Maimah is her generosity of spirit and enormous heart. You will be blessed the moment she opens her mouth," says Fran Harris, former WNBA player with the championship Houston Comets, and television personality.

Last year, Tigerlily Foundation sent a mammogram machine to Liberia, the first at Liberia's JFK Hospital in 16 years. Tigerlily recently received financial support from Virginia-based Middleburg Bank and Lucy, a major clothing retailer with stores around the country, including Minnesota.

"Funding for our programs is essential. It is the only way that we can continue to help women who are going through breast cancer, by providing education, technical equipment and encouragement", says Maimah.

She releases a book later this summer – "How Breast Cancer Saved My Life: Using A Challenge as a Gift" – a story of facing challenges, overcoming them and thriving because of them. She writes on how you can use insurmountable odds to create the life you want to live.

"A challenge can be a gift and a blessing," she has learned.

To book Maimah Karmo to speak at your event, contact her at [www.maimahkarmo.com](http://www.maimahkarmo.com) or call (703) 869-9462.

**About the Author:** Wynfred Russell is former faculty member of the Department of African American & African Studies at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, where for six years he taught African history and culture. He can be reached at 952-487-8131 and at [wynfred.russell@normandale.edu](mailto:wynfred.russell@normandale.edu), or [wynfred@umn.edu](mailto:wynfred@umn.edu).