

Aldie breast cancer survivor helps women rediscover life

By Rachel Leon

In 2005, things could not have been going better for Maimah Karmo. At 31, she had a nice car, a nice house in South Riding and a good job working as a proposal manager for a government contractor. She had a daughter, was engaged to be married and was studying for her master's degree in business administration.

"I was at the point where I had finally gotten everything in life," said Karmo, who moved to Aldie in 2006. "I was on top of the world."

Then one day, while she was doing her routine breast self-exam in the shower, she felt a lump. Concerned, she made an appointment with her OB-GYN and had a mammogram. Then she went to a surgeon, who tried to aspirate the lump; since it wasn't a cyst, it couldn't be aspirated. The surgeon told her she couldn't possibly have breast cancer, she said. After all, she was too young.

The surgeon told her to come back in six months. In that time, the lump doubled in size. Karmo said she pushed for a biopsy and was diagnosed with breast cancer. The cancer was aggressive. She immediately had surgery, and went through chemotherapy and radiation -- a process that took almost a year.

"My life fell apart," Karmo said. "I didn't know how to deal with breast cancer. Being that young -- it was shocking. I was sad, I was depressed. I didn't know how my life would be or what would happen to me. It was one of the darkest times of my life. It was like walking in a valley."

As the treatments sapped her body of energy, making her skin darken and her hair fall out, she spent a lot of time lying in bed thinking and praying about her future.

"I didn't want to feel like a victim," Karmo said. "I wanted to know how to use the experience for something good."

One day, she prayed that God would show her how to deal with her breast cancer. The next morning, she woke up with an idea: to create an organization called the Tigerlily Foundation. Karmo said that the tiger lily, also known as the stargazer lily, represents a woman going through breast cancer.

"When it is fall or winter, the lily sheds its petals," Karmo said. This is similar to a woman who feels like she loses her beauty and strength while going through treatment for breast cancer. "But like the flower in the spring or the summer, a [breast cancer survivor] regains her petals and blooms and grows again."

She added, "Our motto is beauty, strength and transformation. The tiger lily represents that."

The foundation supports young women diagnosed with breast cancer, beginning with education about breast exams, to be begun as young as 13.

Early detection is the key to surviving breast cancer, Karmo said.

"Know your body," Karmo said. She said she only survived breast cancer because she insisted that something was wrong even when the surgeon told her she was too young.

The foundation also provides financial assistance, meals and emotional support.

"When you're in treatment, it seems like every minute is an eternity," said Karmo, who is now in remission.

"The chemotherapy is helping to save your life, but it is also breaking your body down. Women need support."

When she first began the Tigerlily Foundation, she had no money, no experience and no contacts.

"I still had bills to pay," Karmo said. "But the focus isn't on me or the money or what I did or didn't know. Now I honestly couldn't stop if I tried. Whether I live 100 years or 80 years, it is my thing to do."

Her experiences with breast cancer and the Tigerlily Foundation have led her to appear on radio and television, including The Oprah Winfrey Show on Sept. 30, 2008.

Karmo said that the experience of breast cancer has the potential to transform anyone in a positive way.

"Become more who you were meant to be," Karmo said. "I know girls who are in treatment right now who are doing more than women who [do not have breast cancer]."

Breast cancer also changes your perspective, she said.

"Petty things don't matter," she said. "You enjoy little things like the rain and the snow. Women who have gone through this have a new vigor for life."

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