

# Her Own Advocate

To hear Maimah Karmo tell it, developing breast cancer was a good thing. "A lot of people go through this experience, and they think it was the worst time in their life," says Karmo, who lives in Aldie, Virginia, where she manages proposals for government contracts. "But it was the best time in my life because it gave me the opportunity to really live. Before getting breast cancer, I was just kind of existing. I had goals, but I wasn't doing the things I dreamed of."

## Sensing Something Was Wrong

Karmo's transformation began after a mammogram came back negative and a breast surgeon told her not to worry about a lump she had found during a routine self-exam. "She said it was only a cyst,"



Maimah Karmo, 34, lives life to the fullest since her diagnosis.

## What You Need to Know in Your

# 30s

**Consider genetic testing or an MRI if you are in a high-risk group.** You are high-risk if you have two or more relatives with breast or ovarian cancers, or have a close relative under the age of 50 with breast cancer. "Mammograms are less useful in young women because their breast tissue is very dense, which can compromise the mammogram's ability to detect cancers," says Marie Ward, M.D., a surgeon at Long Island Jewish Medical Center.

**Conduct monthly breast self-exams.**

**Watch your diet and exercise.** "Obesity has been linked to increasing one's risk for breast cancer, so maintaining a healthy diet and regular exercise may reduce your risk," Ward explains.

**Stay vigilant about screenings if you are a breast cancer survivor.** "Young women diagnosed with breast cancer have a higher risk of recurrence and may have a more aggressive type of breast cancer," says Ward.

Karmo says. Karmo had no family history of cancer, but she was still losing sleep over the lump and asked for a biopsy six months later. "I'm my own best advocate," she explains. It's a good thing she did: In February 2006, the biopsy revealed that the lump had not only doubled in size but was also Stage II cancer.

## Discovering Her Own Strength

During the same week Karmo was scheduled for surgery, her fiancé broke up with her. "He called me up and said, 'I want to live my life and be happy. I just want out,'" she recalls. "My whole world flipped. But I learned that I'm stronger and more powerful than I ever thought I could be." Karmo went on to have a lumpectomy, chemotherapy and radiation.

When she lost her hair because of the chemo treatments, her family told her to

cover her head so as not to scare her then 3-year-old daughter, Noelle. But Karmo refused. "My daughter was shocked, but she came to love my head bald," she explains. "The more the hair grew back, the more she could tell Mommy was getting better."

## Giving Power to Others

Karmo's journey helped her become attentive to her own health and the health of others. She participated in several breast cancer awareness initiatives and started her own foundation, tigerlily foundation.org, dedicated to educating women around the world about the disease and empowering them to celebrate their best lives every day. Through her organization she's also working to send a mammogram machine to a hospital in her native Liberia. "I'm creating a world and a life of value, wholeness, joy and peace," Karmo says. ▸

“It makes sense to get a second, third or fourth opinion. If they find a lump, don't just trust that everything's okay.”

—Maimah