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Total Health

Unstoppable: The Journey of Maimah Karmo

Her suspicions finally confirmed, Maimah was understandably terrified. "I had been a woman of action, but I just froze. I didn't know where my purse was, I didn't know where my keys were."

Eventually her mother, so long a source of strength, told her, "You've got to snap out of this." One of her best friends, out in California, called her with a simple request: "Breathe." That friend also helped Maimah figure out the insurance procedures and find a good oncologist and a radiologist. It was also around this time that surgeon Dr. Virginia Chiantella of Leesburg came into Maimah's life. "I'm in a chair, curled up, shaking," Maimah said, "and Dr. Chiantella told me, 'I'm your new buddy.'"

Once a treatment team was in place, they got to work fighting the cancer. What followed was an all-out battle, doctors and specialists wielding the weapons of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. The struggle that took its toll, not just on Maimah's body, but on her mind and spirit as well. "I was sick, and I was depressed – that just made it worse," she said. "I thought, I've spent my life being a strong woman, and now even my hair is gone. I had bought a Lexus and had a six-figure salary. This sickness took everything away. Everything that defined me as a woman – as a person – was gone." Maimah reached her lowest point and despaired, "I don't care if I die. I don't care. Why did God do this to me?"

One night, after her second round of chemo, Maimah lay in her bed, initiating a last, desperate conversation with God. "I said, I can't do it anymore," she remembered. "If you exist, give me some kind of sign. If I do live, I will do whatever you want with the rest of my life."

The next morning, Maimah said, "I felt different. I thought, He does exist! I felt closer to God than ever before. I never asked him to help me (before). I never asked, 'Can you help a sister out?' And he showed up."

Maimah did start to feel better, and her cancer went into remission. She felt she knew what God wanted her to do. "Then the Tigerlily was unleashed. Before, I was passionate, but now it's like a whole other propulsion – bigger than me."

Maimah began the Tigerlily Foundation, an organization devoted to helping young women with breast cancer. The name, according to the foundation's website, comes from the association of lily flowers with "all things eternally feminine." Maimah started with a simple online presence in June 2006, but Tigerlily has grown into a multi-faceted effort that helps women ages 15 to 40 become educated and empowered before, during and after a breast cancer diagnosis.

The foundation provides a Chemotherapy Buddy Program and an ongoing support structure so that young breast cancer patients feel less alone. It also offers assistance with finances and insurance issues, as well as with cleaning and groceries, among other services. Maimah provides young patients with special bags containing such comforting items as a warm blanket; lotion and soap; body spray; a candle; a small, heart-shaped bag to squeeze during chemotherapy; and energy rocks with inspirational words like "wisdom" and "heal." She noted that "chemo makes you shaky, nervous – these things help you relax."

With the help of those who assist with the foundation, as well as her Advisory and Medical boards, Maimah's energy and devotion to purpose have yielded some impressive achievements. She has appeared on "Good Morning, America" and "The Oprah Winfrey Show" to talk about young women and breast cancer. She has been enlisted in support of a legislative bill, The Breast Cancer Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act (H.R. 1740 and S. 994), which would allocate funds for education about early detection and provide grants for organizations dedicated to supporting young women with breast cancer.

On October 22, Maimah will further the cause with the Tigerlily Annual Gala, to be held at The Willard Intercontinental Hotel in Washington, D.C. The keynote speaker will be Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (20th District, Florida), sponsor of "The Early Act" bill. The mistress of ceremonies will be Andrea Roane, WUSA Channel 9 news anchor.

Maimah is making terrific progress – but then again, she has a pretty good guide. "I didn't do anything without asking God," she said. "Every step of the way, God's been telling me what to do."

Maimah's daughter, Noelle, just started first grade last month, early on a day that was bittersweet for the young mother and the child who was there for her entire illness. "The first day of school was so emotional for me," she said, her eyes shining with tears. "I didn't know if I was going to be there to see it."

But Maimah was there to see the morning – beautiful, strong, unstoppable.

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For more information on the Tigerlily Foundation and its Annual Gala, facts about breast cancer in young women, and support for young breast cancer patients, visit the website at www.tigerlilyfoundation.org

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