



cure + heal

San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium

Maimah Karmo

Advocacy Across an Ocean

By Lacey Meyer

Born in Monrovia, Liberia, Maimah Karmo left her native West Africa when civil war broke out in 1989 and came to the United States with her family, carrying one suitcase each, to start a new life. Sixteen years later, Karmo's life changed once again.

As the daughter of a nurse, Karmo learned how to do a breast self-exam when she was 12. But when she found a lump in her breast in August 2005, doctors told her it was a cyst. They told Karmo she couldn't have breast cancer — she was only 32. Within six months, the lump had doubled in size.

In February 2006, Karmo was diagnosed with aggressive stage 2 breast cancer. She says besides the birth of her daughter, her diagnosis was the best thing to happen to her. "I had been asking God for my purpose, but not really listening," Karmo says. "Breast cancer gave me energy and a renewal of spirit that I couldn't have dreamed of."

After four rounds of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation, Karmo emerged on the other side of treatment with a new outlook on life and a drive to support and empower other women faced with the disease through her newly created the [Tigerlily Foundation](#).

"I noticed that during my diagnosis and 'coming out' about breast cancer, so many women of my Liberian community were so secretive — everyone wanted to hide breast cancer," Karmo says. "No one wanted to talk about it. They called it 'The C' or said it was a woman problem. I thought, if they can't even say the word, how many of them are doing breast self-examinations or getting mammograms? How many of them are teaching their daughters to do the same?"

With a bachelor's degree in communications and a mindset to change the world, Karmo had the tools she needed to reach these women. She made it her mission to send a mammography machine to the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Monrovia, Liberia, where her uncle is chief of staff. She envisioned a "one-stop shop" breast clinic providing free mammograms as well as educational materials, support, and treatment.

"When I ask God for things, I don't ask him how, I just tell him what I want or ask him what I need to be doing and I go forward," Karmo says. Some people think she's crazy to take on such a large endeavor with no plan of action, she says, but so far it has worked.

One of Karmo's acquaintances from the [National Breast Cancer Coalition's Project LEAD](#) found a mammography machine to send to Monrovia. Then Karmo's uncle found a company to ship the machine for free. Karmo will travel to Liberia to help set up the clinic, which she expects be fully functional by summer 2008.

"I want it also to have a lot of educational materials, so that women come to us to learn," Karmo says. "I would like to increase breast health awareness in Liberia. I plan to create advocates amongst the women I meet. If I can educate and empower them to see why it is important for them to make a difference, then they too can create a better, healthier future for their daughters, mothers, families, and for themselves."