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Support system: Tigerlily Foundation helps young women fight breast cancer

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The day before Mariel Berrios-Riebe received her first chemotherapy treatment, she didn't know what to expect of the therapy, or even what questions to ask. The Stafford, Va., mother of three was already juggling kids, her own business, another business with her husband and volunteering -- where would breast cancer fit in? She didn't know any other women who had battled the disease.

That changed with one phone call. That evening before the first day of chemo, Berrios-Riebe heard from Maimah Karmo, president and founder of the Tigerlily Foundation, a breast cancer support and education organization in Reston.

Berrios-Riebe was 35 years old when she was diagnosed with Stage 2.5 breast cancer in July 2008. Over the months to come, Berrios-Riebe received shipments of ready-made meals for her family and celebrated the holidays with a gift delivery courtesy of Karmo herself.

"Every other foundation that I know of [feels] like a concept or a Web address," Berrios-Riebe says. "Tigerlily is personal. I've had Maimah's cell phone number since that very first call."

Karmo's vision for Tigerlily, founded in 2006, grew from her own fight with breast cancer -- she was diagnosed that February, at age 32. A single mother of a 3-year-old daughter, one of Karmo's primary motivators for creating Tigerlily was to educate young women about their risk for breast cancer. Karmo said she had to push her doctor to even conduct a biopsy on a lump in her breast, because she was so young.

According to the Web site for Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla., author of the EARLY Act (Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act), an estimated 11,000 women under the age of 40 were diagnosed with breast cancer last year. Because of the aggressiveness of breast cancer in young women and failure to diagnose properly, it is the leading cause of cancer deaths in women under the age of 40. Karmo spoke on Capitol Hill in March in support of the bill, and led Tigerlily in organizing a congressional reception earlier this month.

As much as education, Tigerlily is all about support.

Though a small organization, it extends financial support to women whenever possible, helping with medical bills, buying meals and aiding in the cost of wigs and prostheses. "Chemotherapy buddies" help women connect to others and find support during treatment. Tigerlily volunteers offer rides, host outreach and educational events, and more.

Berrios-Riebe has just begun life after treatment. She completed her chemotherapy in April, had a mastectomy in June and went through seven weeks of radiation. She has yet to go through reconstructive surgery or be pronounced cancer-free. But in the meantime, through helping other women diagnosed with breast cancer, promoting the EARLY Act, and spreading the word about early detection, she hopes to help other young women like her.

"Tigerlily has inspired me to get out there and not to keep this to myself, but to help others who have breast cancer," Berrios-Riebe says. "And to help those who don't have it to try to prevent it."

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Learn more

» Join the Tigerlily Foundation for an Annual Gala, 7 to 10 p.m. Oct. 22, which will feature Rep. Wasserman Schultz as keynote speaker. To buy tickets or become a sponsor, visit tigerlilyfoundation.org, or call 1-888-580-6253.

» October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. For more information or to get involved, visit: Tigerlily Foundation: tigerlilyfoundation.org Susan G. Komen for the Cure: komen.org American Cancer Society: cancer.org National Breast Cancer Awareness Month organization: nbcam.org National Breast Cancer Foundation: nationalbreastcancer.org

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