

## BARBARA BECKWITH'S BREAST CANCER JOURNEY

In 1994, calcifications were found in my breast during a routine yearly mammogram. An biopsy confirmed that I had breast cancer. The results of the biopsy were discussed with me. I was told that I would need a partial mastectomy and auxiliary dissection. I cried when I got to my car. The crying was from fear of the unknown.

On September 26, 1994 I had surgery and stayed in the hospital overnight. I was discharged with a drainage tube and given a prescription for antibiotics. The tube was removed October 4. My surgical scar looks like a big, twisted smile! Following consultation with the radiation oncologist October 11<sup>th</sup>, I returned on October 21<sup>st</sup> for markings to guide the oncologist during treatment. Radiation therapy began on October 24.

On the following day, I joined the African American Cancer Support Group, founded and led by Liz Evans. This group was and is an invaluable resource of kindred spirits. On October 27, I met with the medical oncologist who explained that my tumor was 1.4 cm and very aggressive. I would need chemotherapy, two weeks on and two weeks off, for six months.

On November 11, 1994, my journal entry read, "I will be on radiation and chemo at the same time. People think I'm sick. I'm not sick, I'm fighting to live! The cancer doesn't hurt. What will all this medication and radiation do to my body?"

The most overwhelming effect for me was fatigue. Chemotherapy robbed me of self control. I recall several incidents that left me feeling helpless. I found it important to be able to laugh at myself. That laughter helped me to gain the strength I needed to pull through. My belief in God and my own laughter helped me gain the strength that I needed to get through all of the challenging times.

The cancer experience has taught me that there is a blessing in being able to share, a blessing in continued healing, a blessing of leaving a legacy as I live and heal, and a blessing of knowing that God is in my life. Cancer has made me a stronger person and I have had the blessing of being able to bond with so many strong women.

My goal in life has become advocacy for cancer education and early detection. I have a deep-rooted passion for dispelling the fear connected with cancer, and ending the silence that seems to surround the word: "cancer". It is of the utmost importance for me to embrace many communities by educating as many individuals as possible.