

LaTeacha Coleman never stopped competing in beauty pageants, despite her cancer diagnosis. Here she is shown in the Mrs. Fort Bragg pageant at Seabrook Auditorium in July 2008.

Staff file photo



Coleman

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be able to help others. I've been very fortunate that my husband was in the military and our insurance covered most of our medical expenses."

But Coleman has heard stories about women who wait to have surgery or to get treatment because they can't afford it. "It's heartbreaking," she said, "because I put myself in their shoes."

Coleman was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007 at the age of 25. She underwent several surgeries, including a mastectomy, and finished a regimen of chemotherapy.

She's happy to report that she is cancer free and has been getting back to her normal life. Her hair has grown back, and she no longer wears wigs. She has more time and energy now to exercise and plan vacations with her husband.

"When we do go through surgeries, and when we do go through chemotherapy, our self-confidence tends to fail," Coleman said, "and so just to help someone be able to gain that confidence back is something that I would just really love to do."

Through her Web site, Coleman provides contact information for young women who are fighting breast cancer to call or write to her. She hopes sharing her own struggles with the disease can inspire them to continuing fighting. The site also has a place for inspirational stories from other breast-cancer survivors.

"It's very scary when just going through it. You know nothing," Coleman said. "You just don't know what to do. So I try to think of especially the women that are just diagnosed, trying to make them feel comfortable."

She's also planning a series of "Reach Out! Uplift!" multi-city tours that aim to assist breast-cancer survivors of all ages as well as raise money for research. Coleman plans to serve as a motivational speaker.

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Coleman, who has been competing in beauty pageants since childhood, won the title of Mrs. Global US in June. It was her first national title. Last summer, one month after completing her last round of chemotherapy, Coleman competed in the East Coast USA Pageant. She finished third in the petite division.

"I'm going to use the

crown to be able to talk about breast-cancer awareness," Coleman said. "I'm going to take a break from pageants. I'm going to definitely do my appearances with my crown but to use it in a good sense."

Participating in pageants has made her a skilled public speaker. She is comfortable with being in the public eye and serving as a role model for young breast-cancer survivors, and young women in general. UNC Healthcare used her picture in billboards and ads for its cancer center.

"Being diagnosed with the breast cancer is the best worst thing," Coleman said. "And now it's starting to become the best thing. You know, it's sad to say, but a lot of things I never would have imagined — being on a commercial or a billboard. These were things that were only in your dreams. Had I not been diagnosed with cancer, a lot of this wouldn't happen."

She's able to help and inspire others, Coleman said, which has been a great feeling. "I would rather it happen to me and me survive and be able to tell my story," she said.

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