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Finding purpose in the fight: One woman's breast cancer battle

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by Senior Airman Mindy Bloem
43rd Airlift Wing staff writer

10/18/2009 - **POPE AIR FORCE BASE, N.C.** -- "It's the best worst thing that ever happened to me." Believe it or not, that's how one Pope spouse characterizes her battle with breast cancer. In December of 2007, Lateacha, wife of Staff Sgt. Demetris Coleman, 43rd Communications Squadron, had a surgical biopsy to remove two lumps that formed on her breast. Her husband was en route back from a deployment to Iraq and was trying desperately to make it home in time to support Lateacha. His supervisor at the time was able to hasten his return so Sergeant Coleman could be with his wife when she got the results from the biopsy. It was a good thing too. One lump turned out to be a fibroid, but the other was malignant. When the doctor gave her the news, it was hard for Mrs. Coleman to wrap her mind around it. "I went through a little bit of denial at first," she said. "I just kept telling myself it was just a tumor as a way to minimize the fact it was cancer." The doctor tried to allay her fears and explained to her the cancer was treatable. "I knew I had a choice," Mrs. Coleman said. "I could see that if I let it, I could become really depressed over the fact I had been given this life-altering news, but I decided I was not going to let it beat me." The Colemans then received a second opinion and confirmation about the cancer from UNC Hospital. She was diagnosed with stage 2A cancer. Just two months after receiving the news, Mrs. Coleman did something she hadn't done since her adolescence. She renewed her love for beauty pageants and began competing again. "I wanted to use my platform to inspire others who were going through the same thing," she explained. "I wanted people to know that cancer has no barriers. It does not discriminate. I was only 25 when I was diagnosed with it. People need to know that it does happen, but there is a way out." Mrs. Coleman understands all too well the toll cancer can take on a body and wants to do all she can to help others through the difficult process. "There have been days I don't even remember because I was so out of it from all the chemotherapy treatments I was undergoing. I sometimes see people going through chemo and it brings me back to when I was going through it. If I can bring them any comfort or inspire them in some way, I feel I have helped somehow." Throughout the painful process, Mrs. Coleman never let the cancer defeat her spirit. In fact, when the time came for her to shave her head, she decided even that wouldn't defeat her attitude. "When I shaved my head, that's when the reality started setting in," she said. "I decided when I would shave my head because I knew the chemo would take my hair and I wanted to be in control of my own destiny, not the cancer." Sergeant Coleman, like many other spouses who have to watch their loved one go through the process from the sidelines, wanted to give his wife whatever she needed. It's different going through it as the caregiver as opposed to the one battling disease, he said. "My main role and what she needed was for me to be strong for her," he said. "I was really scared, but I didn't let her know that. The things that go through your mind about what can happen are always there, but my feelings toward her were pretty cut and dry. I wanted to be there for her in any shape or form. I wanted to dispel any feelings she might have that I would leave her or not want her. None of that mattered. She is my wife and I love her. His support was key in Mrs. Coleman's recovery, and she admits those thoughts did go through her mind. "Your self esteem goes down," she said. "I felt like damaged goods. I had only been married for 1 1/2 years at the time, so it took time to feel better about myself and to not focus on superficial things." Mrs. Coleman also realizes that having someone else to live for was instrumental to her recovery. "A lot of people say, 'I have to beat this for myself,' but I was trying to beat it for him because I couldn't stand the idea of us not being able to continue our lives together," she said. The Colemans also feel grateful to have received the medical care that comes from military benefits. "We didn't have one cost," Sergeant Coleman said. "I found out one of her surgeries cost about \$10,000, but we never had to spend one penny on it. That peace of mind is a huge blessing for someone going through this type of ordeal." Mrs. Coleman said the battle against cancer is won or lost in the mind. "It's not so much the physical aspect of the disease, but the mental that gets you," she said. "You have to have faith you are going to get through it. You never know what you can do until you go through it. You do what you have to do to survive it." In fact, Mrs. Coleman has started "Life After Cancer," a non-profit organization that provides resources and education tools for women concerning their health options. She also is presenting a breast cancer awareness event called "Reach out! Uplift!" being sponsored by the Holiday Inn, located off I-95, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Oct. 31. Mrs. Coleman will be one of several guest speakers for the event and has many events lined up, including a fashion show, a skit and an auction. She credits her cancer as the reason many doors have been opened for her in life. "If it hadn't been for breast cancer, all the life lessons and opportunities I've gained through it would have never been known to me," Mrs. Coleman said.

Photos



Lateacha Coleman, breast cancer survivor, and husband, Staff Sgt. Demetris Coleman, 43rd Communications Squadron, raise breast cancer awareness by appearing on a billboard for UNC healthcare.

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