

The Accidental Activist By Bridgette Hempstead
End Well Symposium, December 6, 2018

Start of Transcript

[Crowd Applauding]

Well, I'm Bridgette Hempstead and my story began — well, actually it started 57 years ago when I was born. Thank you, mom! [Chuckles] But fast forward to being 34, and I was sitting on my couch, I had my daughter, was 2 and a half years old, my baby daughter, and the Lord spoke to me and said, "Go get a mammogram and do it now." And so I'm sitting there, she sleeps, the phone's right here, I grabbed the phone and I called to set up that appointment for a mammogram. I really wasn't thinking about cancer. But I made that appointment.

So I go in, and made the appointment, I go into the doctor's office and there's like, "Oh, wow! It's really good to see you" and "Let's do a breast exam and then see, we'll go from there." The doctor began to give me a laundry list of reasons why I didn't need a **[00:01:00]** mammogram. Then she told me, "You're African-American. It doesn't happen to your community. Come back in 10 years!" So I looked at her and I say, "Okay, the Lord spoke to me." [Crowd Laughing] I said, "I want a mammogram and I want it now." [Crowd Continued Laughing and Applauding] I got the bossiness from my mom. And so she gave me a mammogram and I was diagnosed with breast cancer on my 35th birthday. But when that cute — oh did I show it? Is she there? There she is! [Crowd Laughing] 35 when I had it sassy. So my diagnosis came when I was 35 that morning on my birthday. And so I called my mom at that time I was married — and as I called my mother, she says, "If the Lord warned you about getting a mammogram, and now **[00:02:00]** you're diagnosed with breast cancer, you have a work to do. So go do that work."

So, bandaged up after the surgeries and everything, I went on and I started three days after my diagnosis our organization called *Cierra Sisters African-American Organization*. Cierra's an African word which means knowing. If you have knowledge, you have the power to fight against the offensive breast cancer. My advocacy started right away. Why? Because it needed to. All you saw was white women celebrating "I'm a cancer survivor! We're in peak!" There were no African-American, no black faces in 1996 celebrating. I want to make sure that I made a difference.

So *Cierra Sisters* came about. Why we got 20 to 30% more African-Americans that are likely to die from breast cancer, there's a myriad of reasons why this ends up happening. And one we're **[00:03:00]** told "It's not gonna happen to you." Or they have symptoms and the doctors are saying "Let's just wait and see." Then they wait and see and it ends up being their death sentence, too early. Not that we're not all gonna die one day, but how about let's live some life! And live it to the fullest. So *Cierra Sisters* was born. Out of the frustrations of — There's nothing out there for my community and I'm a black woman with breast cancer. I'm here wanting to make a difference. So we have an org, we have a training program called CEPS. A picture up here to your left — my left... on this side [Everybody Laughing]

That's a picture of a woman who was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer and so she was told something different by another **[00:04:00]** healthcare system. We got her out of that healthcare system, got her into a healthcare system that understood what triple negative was, knew how to treat it and the treatment plan totally changed. And so when we looked up the statistics of the doctor that she was gonna see, everybody was really pissed off about it because everybody that's on it died — right away. So she went into a new system, we have our advocate there, educator that is supporting her through the process.

Cierra sisters also do some incredible outreach in the community. Here's you'll see that we do a Wellness Festival and we deliver a thousand bags of life-saving information door to door to the community. Why? Because sometimes our community are not gonna come out to this healthcare event because of a trust issue. There's some real serious issues there. So they went up to cars, up to houses [00:05:00], they want as families to make sure that our community knows exactly what's going on. And how to access healthcare today. And sometimes the barriers are so incredible that they don't wanna go to the doctors. They're afraid to go to the doctors and when they go to the doctors, doctors are telling them, "You're okay" and then they're not okay. So which is it? Am I okay or am I not okay? Somebody tell me the truth!

So let me share with you a story about Ms. Bonnie, isn't she beautiful? Bonnie was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. Before it turned to Stage 4, it was Stage 3, and the doctors told her to — she'd lived in Alaska but she came down to Seattle, she found *Cierra Sisters*, and one of the first thing I asked her was did they tell you about any clinical trials that are going on [00:06:00] for your situation? She said, "I don't know what you're talking about." Her doctor never told her that there were clinical trials that were available to her. So we got her into a clinical trial, it was great! The clinical trial was working. But what happened, it was so — the disease was so far gone, it was not able to give her more time. And she said, "I thought I had more time." So as an organization we came together, we made sure that Bonnie was never alone when she passed away. She didn't pass away by herself. But the healthcare system failed her in Alaska and in Seattle! That was not a part of an adequate healthcare system for her. So Bonnie, as she bravely said before she passed away, I took her from the hospital. We were gonna on a... taking another sister [00:07:00] that needed to desperately go to the hospital and if she didn't go and have surgery, she will pass away that time, not Bonnie. So Bonnie is in her trench coat, a hat scarf and I said, "Well, I'll take you to the house and so you get rested" and she said, "No. I'm a Cierra Sister. I ride to the hospital with you." So she leaves from her hospital bed to another hospital bed helping another woman making sure that her life will continue to go on.

So fast forward 18 years later, I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer disease. The doctors then told me that "Oh, there's nothing wrong with you. Take this medicine and you'll be fine." So that wasn't the deal. I was diagnosed, I had it in my lungs and my liver, and the doctor that I was seeing, the oncologist I was seeing, says to me and my daughter, "You only have a year to live and [00:08:00] you will never sing again." My daughter told me I jumped off the table and I pointed my finger at the doctors and said, "I don't receive it in the name of Jesus!"

[Crowd Laughing]

I don't remember that. You'll have to ask Deedee. So being faced with I'm gonna die soon, my daughter and my sisters booked a trip and we went parasailing in Jamaica [Crowd Laughing] so she said three days later, "Mom you called me up and you said 'Oh, I'm not ready to die yet, I'll just keep on living'" And so I did. However, that was five years ago! And being in the trenches of this healthcare system where one, we're one respecting the end-of-life. Two, we're ending lives sometimes way too early, not willing to give the best care for our patients that are patients of color [00:09:00] won't that ought to make a difference, right? So I — yes!

[Crowd Applauding and Cheering]

If now I'm being treated as a chronic disease, they give me the treatment. The doctor that I had went to, I asked her, I said "I like to be a part of a clinical trial," she refused. I fired her. [Crowd Laughing]

Can we fire them? Okay. And wouldn't get a doctor I had been an outreach for over 20 years. And so I'm on different types of medication and I'd never had chemo, the chemo drip and I've

never lost my hair although I don't have any eyebrows, I painted those on today [Everybody Laughing] And so I continue to sing. So 9 months later, I was invited to the Seahawks Cowboys game to sing the national anthem before 90,000 people [00:10:00]

[Crowd Applauding and Cheering]

There was a documentary that they have on me singing at church and so this is what I say, "Live your life to the best! To the fullest. Live and when you leave, leave with a bang!" Right? Who's gonna go parasailing with me? That was amazing! My daughter says, "Mom, this is cool. I thought we were just gonna go on a boat trip in the ocean" and so they say, step into this, I'm like, "What is this?!" So I'm stepping in, giving it a go, parasailing... didn't know it, we're up in the air! [Crowd Laughing] My daughter gets me up in the air too she says, "Oh my God, I'm scared..." I'm like, "This is amazing! Look at what we do!" So go parasailing, live your best life. Live it to the end! When you leave, leave with a bang! Why am I gonna sit around dwelling on the fact [00:10:00] that one day I'm gonna leave, because we're all gonna leave? However, let me go when I'm ready to go or when my body says it's just had too much. But don't let it happen because a doctor says, "You're black, I'm gonna hide treatments from you. I'm gonna hide these different things from you and I'm not gonna let you get into a clinical trial."

We have the power. So I want you to do something. I want you to stand up. We often hear in the bible that you know, tomorrow's not promised to anybody. So we don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow, we may not wake up tomorrow. I want you to give yourself a hug, a nice little hug

[Everybody Hugging Themselves] and let me ask you a question, are you here today [00:12:00]?

Crowd: Yes!

So tomorrow, they said tomorrow is not promised, but I wanna leave you with this. Today was a tomorrow...that wasn't promised. Live your life to the fullest and leave with a bang!

[Crowd Applauding and Cheering]

Host: You were amazing, you are so amazing. Sing! Right? That's what — Will you sing a couple lines? She'll do it!

Bridgette {singing} *Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need... He lets me rest in the manor's grass and he leads me beside the quiet streams. He restores [00:13:00] my failing him and he helps me to do it. I nurse him the most. That's why I'm saved, that's why I'm saved, that's why I'm saved... oh yes I am saved in His arms.*

[Crowd Cheering and Applauding]

Host: Stay here. You gotta take the stand with us.

End of Transcript