

Somebody Loves the Sisters

Two African American women who survived breast cancer have started a ministry to help women who face the dreaded disease.

When Dorothy and Lareatha met some years ago, they had no idea they would one day head a ministry together. That was before they discovered they had breast cancer. Both women exercised their faith in God, and today they are helping a city of women beat the dreaded disease. The two meet the needs of African American women in central New Jersey, where too few women with breast cancer know where to turn.

In the late 1990s, Dorothy Reed and Lareatha “Rea” Payne both learned they had breast cancer. “Devastated” is how each felt at first, but through it all they’ve learned God had a plan for them. “Fear engulfs with the word cancer,” says Payne, a six-year breast cancer survivor.

Several days after their diagnoses, each woman began to think differently. After several days of depression, Payne, whose husband, Edison, is the pastor of Travelers Fellowship Baptist Church in Piscataway, New Jersey, concluded, “If we talk our faith in God, then we have to live it.” She had encouraged others, and now she was being tested. She turned to the Scriptures and allowed God’s truth to renew her faith and mind.

For Reed, a five-year breast cancer survivor who worships at First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in Somerset, New Jersey, there were initial tears and the feeling of weakness in her legs when she learned she had cancer. But she too turned to God, sought prayer and found encouragement in John 10:10: “‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full,’”

(NIV). Today she says that through it all God has given her a mission.

Reed is president of the Sisters Network of Central New Jersey, one of 40 chapters of the national Sisters Network Inc. Payne is the chapter's vice president. Together they manage the office in Somerset.

In addition, they conduct monthly support-group meetings and attend conferences to stay educated about topics related to breast cancer and health insurance. They also speak at women's ministries and colleges to educate the public and raise awareness.

When the twosome aren't standing before grammar school students, they interview for cable television and radio, plan and execute a large annual project and smaller monthly projects, raise funds, and offer practical support to members and their families.

In a normal day, much of Reed's and Payne's time is devoted to this practical support. They are "on call," ready and willing to go help out wherever they are needed. They begin some days by working at members' homes, helping to ready their children for school—and getting them on a bus or driving them to school. They may receive a call from a member who needs a ride to a doctor's appointment—or just a friend to go along.

Through these dedicated women, the love of God is demonstrated in the day-to-day routines of life. Women receive help to cope with the details of daily living that have been made more challenging by their additional struggle with breast cancer.

“Getting in there, helping every female, not letting them lose their lives to cancer ... that’s what we’re about.” says Payne, the mother of a grown son and daughter and grandmother of three girls. ”

Because of the disparity that exists between health care for African Americans and health care for other Americans, The Sisters Network of Central New Jersey is a valuable resource for women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer. It provides information about the options available to them. It also is a beacon of hope because it is led by women who have been through breast cancer themselves.

“Sisters ... is my heart—helping women, educating women, until I see the mortality rate going down,” says Reed, a former corporate worker who was led to salvation when faced with the responsibility of parenthood. She has one 25-year-old daughter and also raised a niece.

And help women she does. Reed met Fran Parson at church. Parson had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer and was asking for prayer. She later came to the Sisters Network, where she received help in selecting a doctor for chemotherapy and information about breast reconstruction.

“You’re going to make this,” Reed encouraged her.

Parson went through the chemo-therapy and had breast reconstruction in July.

Reed and Payne met Meg (not her real name) differently. Meg, in her late 30s with two children, had been made homeless when her landlord lost his house. Because she received \$650 a month

in child support, Meg was not eligible for social services and had nowhere to go. The Cancer Institute contacted the Sisters Network, asking Reed and Payne to talk with her.

Meg was rather belligerent before her chemo-therapy treatment, but Reed and Payne went with her, taking clean clothes to her and calming her down. Later, after a social worker helped Meg find an apartment, Reed and Payne furnished the place and provided a much-desired television. Meg now is continuing treatment, doing well and enjoying her new living arrangements.

Reed and Payne know what their 40 members with breast cancer go through, but they also know about hope in God and His goodness, as well as hope for a future.

Reed and Payne met through Pearl Grace, who co-founded the Sisters Network of Central New Jersey. It was also through Grace and her struggle with breast cancer that Payne and Reed learned much, as they accompanied her on doctors visits, listened to her questions for the physicians—and their responses—and generally observed.

And Grace seemed to sense God using her to prepare her friends. “Just listen,” she once told them in a doctor’s office, as he was about to answer her question. Although Grace is now with the Lord, she continues to influence, encourage and live on in the hearts and minds of the two ministers she mentored.

Entrusted with the mission, Reed and Payne began funding the work themselves. Later, they received grants that covered the office rent, telephone charges and other minor operational

costs. No salaries are involved.

The New Jersey chapter of the Sisters Network was started in 2000. An office lease was signed in February 2001 and the ministry moved in that March. In April 2001 the New Jersey chapter received the National Chapter of the Year Award from Sisters Network. Reed and Payne believe they won because they are serious about making the ministry work.

Additional funds are needed to open a support house for women with breast cancer. A new team member, Bebe Major, was added in September 2002 to help with this vision. Major works on fund-raising projects and at reaching out to churches, trying to make them aware of the Sisters Network and encouraging their support in every way.

“[Reed and Payne] are a very effective team,” Major says of the ministry’s founders. “The weakness of the one is the strength of the other. They’re hands-on people. And they are so consumed and involved with these women.”

When asked why she thought God had given her this mission, Reed says: “Maybe because He knew I would do it.”

“I feel honored that God chose me [to do this work],” says Payne, who became a Christian years ago while being hospitalized and fearing she would die. She is the author of *Sisters Keepin’ It Real* (Gazelle Press), a book about a young African American woman diagnosed with breast cancer.

Reed and Payne are godsend to the community. Although once diagnosed with breast cancer, these women have continued serving the Lord. He has fulfilled the truth of Psalm 118:17,

a verse Reed has applied to her own life over and over: "I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord."

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For more about Sisters Network of Central New Jersey, call 732-246-8300. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.