

COURAGE, LIFE & HOPE

REFLECTIONS *of a journey*



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Shiree Dandridge

Shiree Dandridge is a professional poet finishing work on a compilation of poems she and her manager hope will be picked up by a record label. It's a progressive concept, and one that probably has more traction in her hometown of Long Beach, CA than in her temporary residence of Tigerton, WI.

Launching a business career requires planning, and Shiree is considering designs for new business cards. She wants a card with a graphic image on it, and a hummingbird is the current front-runner. That's because the bird's natural attributes mirror her own.

"Hummingbirds are tiny, but they're also very feisty, very territorial creatures," she said. "I'm like that: I'm small, but I'm strong."

That strength has been tested the last three years. In January 2003, Shiree found a walnut-size lump in her breast, and by the following month had received the diagnosis: breast cancer.

Because of her family's history of cancer, Shiree had always been vigilant about breast self-examinations. She received the news both with surprise and acceptance.

"I've known about the disease since I was 6," she said. "Somehow, in the back of my mind, I always knew I'd get it. But nothing can prepare you to hear it."

More difficult to deal with was the lack of research focusing on cancer in Black women. When two specialists gave her differing treatment recommendations, Shiree was unable to find salient studies to help her choose. She opted instead to treat the disease holistically, and the cancer metastasized through her body. When she was finally admitted to the hospital in February 2005, she weighed just 98 pounds, and was very close to death. But she kept fighting, and she had faith.

"You always hear, 'The light is at the end of the tunnel,'" Shiree said. "I tell people that sometimes you can't see the light because you're not far enough down the tunnel. You have to keep walking. That's what faith is."

Shiree's faith has been rewarded with support from unexpected places: neighbors who offered unsolicited help, financial assistance from her children's schools, and her mother's recommendation that she seek care at a cancer center in the middle of Wisconsin.

Shiree left the California hospital on March 15, 2005 and the next day she met with Dr. Hamied Rezazadeh at the Aspirus Regional Cancer Center.



"I didn't know what to expect here in Wisconsin," she said. "When Dr. Rezazadeh came in, he was like the sun; he's a very loving human being. The folks at the cancer center, they treat me like a family member. I hug the nurses. It's a warm, different kind of environment."

Shiree has been receiving chemotherapy treatments every three weeks, and making the 45-minute drive from Tigerton weekly to have the line in her arm

flushed. She has tolerated the treatments well, but has found the separation from her six children trying. She carries their photo with her everywhere, and phones them every night.

"The longest I've ever been away from them is a week," she said. "This is very, very difficult."

Yet Shiree continues to look to the future, and to plan for her family's care. While she hasn't written new poems about her experience with cancer, she has begun journaling, documenting her days the way she did as a teen.

"I'm optimistic about the future," she said. "If I was going to die, it would have been in California. I step out on faith; it's the way I was raised."