



# Brave & Beautiful

## Debra Berry



Sometimes, memories of past holidays blend together, but Debra Berry will never forget the Thanksgiving of 2020.

That's because the day before the holiday, Berry, 59, was informed that she had Stage 3 breast cancer. "I had been having problems with my right shoulder because I had four tears in my rotator cuff," she said.

Berry said that in October, she was applying some cream under her arm to help relieve the pain when she discovered a lump.

I had just had a mammogram in March (2019) but nothing showed up," she said.

Berry underwent a biopsy in mid-November.

The day before Thanksgiving, Berry said she had just arrived home from the grocery store when the phone rang.

"They told me I had cancer of the very worst kind," she recalled. "I felt like I was going to die. Who wants to hear that right before the holidays? What scared me is the speed of the growth."

Berry began chemotherapy on December 18, something she had to be talked into doing by her husband, Willie, and her four adult children. She also has more than 20 grandchildren.

"I did it for six and a half months, and it didn't work," she said of the treatment. "Even though it was Stage 3, it wasn't feeding off my hormones or estrogen."

The matter was made worse by Berry's losing her thick hair. One of her daughters urged her to cut it off before it fell out. She declined, thinking it wouldn't happen; but it did.

"Losing my hair was the scariest part," she said.

Berry underwent surgery at Aultman Hospital on June 7, followed by current radiation treatments, which began in late July. The surgery, which included the removal of four lymph nodes, was a success.

She is scheduled to undergo a total of about two dozen sessions of radiology, plus five "booster" sessions.

A chemotherapy-pill regimen was stopped when they caused headaches and numbness in her extremities.

Berry lauds the treatment she received at Aultman.

"The nurses, the staff, the doctors were phenomenal," she said.

What advice would Berry give women who may be facing a similar diagnosis?

"Trust God's timing; God will take you through it and take you out of it," she said. "Be thankful for a testimony. I thought about those kids on the St. Jude commercials, and I thought, 'If they can do it, I can do it.'"

Berry also urges people to get regular screenings. Several women in her family have dealt with cancer, including her youngest daughter, who had cervical cancer, and her late mother, who had stomach cancer.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reports that Black women have the highest rates of breast cancer than any other demographic.

According to the Black Women's Health Imperative, "Black women are more likely to receive a diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer, be younger at diagnosis and have more fatal outcomes than white women."

Because of this, some medical experts are encouraging Black women to undergo screening for breast cancer 10 to 15 years sooner than is recommended for most other women.

"The technology is phenomenal today," Berry said. "The survival rates are the best they've ever been."

Berry said that she plans to return to her job at SARTA, where she's worked as a driver for 22 years.

"I feel great," she said. "I am cancer-free. God is good, all the time."

— CHARITA GOSHAY