

# Cancer Warriors

BY JEANNINE AMBER · ESSENCE · MAY 19, 2014

Learning you have cancer is devastating enough. But living through the treatment and its effects on body and spirit can be one of the greatest tests. Meet three inspiring women who have met these challenges with grit and grace, and for whom each day is a gift.

Last year, Tony- and Grammy-nominated actor Valisia LeKae, 35, was shining bright, starring on Broadway as Diana Ross in *Motown: The Musical*. In November, a routine gynecological exam led to a diagnosis of ovarian cancer. After surgery and six rounds of chemo, LeKae says she feels “more beautiful than ever.”

“When my doctor called, I was sitting in a recliner, where I’d been sleeping for the past ten days recovering from the surgery I’d had to remove an ovarian cyst. It had been there for years, but a recent exam revealed it was growing, and my doctor wanted to remove it. There was no discussion of cancer. No one mentioned the word.

“My recovery was very painful. I could barely stand. But when my doctor informed me that the biopsy showed I had ovarian cancer, I immediately stood up. I told my man I didn’t want to spend another day in that chair griping and moaning. I wanted to live my life!

“I knew I wasn’t going to be able to do this by myself, so the first people I called were my prayer warriors: my parents, grandparents and best friends. They’re strong in their faith and they prayed for me continuously. That became my foundation.

“A month later I had surgery to remove my right ovary and fallopian tube. I was lucky they caught the cancer early, before it had spread. But I still needed to have six rounds of chemotherapy. On December 30, a few weeks after I’d found out that I’d been nominated for a Grammy [as part of the cast of *Motown* for Best Musical Theater Album], I was in the doctor’s office receiving my first round of chemotherapy.

“They tell you your hair will fall out about three weeks after you begin your treatment. I calculated that I would still have a head full of hair when the Grammys rolled around. Eleven days after I started chemo, my hair started to come out in clumps. I had a huge Afro I’d been growing for a year. For four days straight my hair fell out until I couldn’t take it anymore.



“I went to Brenda Braxton’s salon in Harlem to get my hair cut. She’d been a part of the Motown family. At the time, I shed a tear. Now I look at myself in the mirror, without all that hair, and I see traces of my parents. I see my father’s lips and my mother’s cheekbones. I see the people I’ve come from and grown up with, and the strength they’ve given me. I see what I have to live for, and I’ve never been happier in my life.”

*To read the full feature “Cancer Warriors,” pick up the June 2014 issue of ESSENCE, on newsstands now.*