



Photos by Cameron Christopher

‘PINK QUEENS’

Local breast cancer survivors celebrate with a joyous photo shoot

BY LISA DAVIS

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Last month, three Calhoun County women got together for a photo shoot to celebrate the fact that they had all survived breast cancer.

Shandrika Christopher, 38, has been cancer-free for six years. Temecha Williams, 43, has been cancer-free for eight months. Jackie Judkins, 48, had her last chemo treatment in September.

The photo shoot was Christopher’s idea. She made a list of props to round up: pink glitter, pink sparkles, pink boxing gloves (“because we all fought through this”), a pink crown and a pink throne. “We’re queens. We’ve made it. We stand for all women,” Christopher said.

The photo shoot was just for fun, just for them, but the photos quickly went viral on social media, appearing on news reports in Montgomery, Atlanta and Miami. “It’s bigger than us now,” Christopher said. “It’s about awareness. It’s about life.”

Most of all, it’s about “bringing joy out of a dark situation.”

...

Shandrika Christopher was 32 years

“We’re queens. We’ve made it. We stand for all women.”

— Shandrika Christopher

old when she found a lump in her breast during a monthly self-exam six years ago. She thought maybe it was a cyst. She prayed it was anything but cancer.

But it was cancer. “My whole world changed,” she said. “I had kids, family ... I just got tunnel vision. I didn’t want to eat. I didn’t want to talk. I hoped if I went to sleep, it would not be there when I woke up.”

And then one day, she just checked her attitude. “I said, ‘Stop crying, but on your big-girl panties and go forth. Don’t waste your time not living.’”

She had a DNA test done and tested positive for the BRCA1 gene mutation. BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations can raise a person’s risk of developing breast cancer up to 72 percent, as well as raise the risk of ovarian, pancreatic or prostate cancers.

Even though her cancer had not spread, Christopher opted to have a

preventive double mastectomy as well as surgery to remove her ovaries and fallopian tubes.

“They’re just boobs,” she said. “I’d rather be here and cancer-free.”

She also underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatment.

When she first got her diagnosis, she didn’t tell anyone outside her immediate support network. “I didn’t want a pity party,” she said.

But then in 2015 Regional Medical Center called and asked if she would share her story for the hospital’s “Right Care, Right Here” campaign. She ended up with her face on a billboard. “This is not what I envisioned,” she said. “But God had another plan.”

Christopher has been cancer-free for six years. Her son is now 22, and her daughter is 8. “At this point, it’s all about living,” she said. “Before, I was really just existing in the world. Now I’m living.

This was life-changing — for the better.”

...

Temecha Williams was in her last semester of nursing school when she was diagnosed last year. She had waited to go back to school. She was 42, had a family and was working as a nurse at RMC.

For two weeks, she had been noticing a lump under her arm. She thought it was just a swollen lymph node. One Friday morning, as she was finishing a 12-hour shift, she decided to head to the employee health clinic and get it checked out before the weekend.

She was already scheduled to have her annual mammogram the next week. Last year’s mammogram had been clear. She had no family history of breast cancer.

The lump under her arm was indeed a swollen lymph node. But the nurse at the employee health center also felt something suspicious nearby in her breast. Williams went immediately for a mammogram, followed by an ultrasound, followed by a biopsy.

She had gotten off work at 7 a.m. that morning. It was now 1 p.m. She had

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Plant-based diet may be key component in treating breast cancer, UAB study says

BY KATHERINE STEPHEN

Consolidated Publishing

Researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham have found a dietary combination that transforms the most lethal of all breast cancers into a highly treatable breast cancer.

Specifically, scientists involved in the Scientific Reports study say a particular plant-based diet may be the key.

Trygve Tollefsbol, Ph.D., D.O., professor of biology in the College of Arts and Sciences and senior scientist with the Comprehensive Cancer Center as well as Yuanyuan Li, M.D., Ph.D., a research assistant professor of biology, use epigenetics — the study of biological mechanisms that will switch genes on and off — as a mechanism to identify ways we

can change human gene expressions in fatal diseases, including breast cancer.

All breast cancers are either estrogen receptor-positive or estrogen receptor-negative. The tumors in estrogen receptor, or ER, negative breast cancer are much less likely to respond to hormone therapy than are tumors that are ER-positive, which means that ER-negative breast cancers are typically very aggressive.

“Unfortunately, there are few options for women who develop ER-negative breast cancer,” Tollefsbol said. “Because of the poor prognosis this type of cancer carries, new advances in prevention and treatment for ER-negative breast cancer have particular significance.”

With that in mind, Tollefsbol and fellow researchers set out to further

research how scientists can efficiently neutralize mechanisms that lead to and worsen ER-negative cancers. Up until this time, conventional cancer prevention has focused primarily on single chemopreventive compounds.

“One reason many in the field shy away from combining two or more compounds at a time for treatment research is the fear of adverse effects and potential interactions that are unknown,” Tollefsbol said. “To overcome that concern, we chose compounds that we felt confident would interact well together, because they have similar favorable biological effects but still have different



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Submitted photo

Calhoun County gets its own pink fire truck

BY LISA DAVIS

ldavis@annistonstar.com

Calhoun County and East Alabama now have their own pink fire truck, thanks to B.R. Wilson, chairman of the east Alabama chapter of Pink Heals and the assistant fire chief of the Quad Cities Volunteer Fire Department.

For the past four years, Wilson had been working with the central Alabama chapter of Pink Heals outside Birmingham, arranging for that chapter to bring its pink fire truck to Calhoun County to help raise awareness of breast cancer and collect money for local charities.

"One day, the guy from over there said, 'B.R., I don't mind coming over there,

but you need to get your own chapter.' He put me in touch with Dave Graybill — the founder of Pink Heals in Arizona. After talking with Graybill, he said, 'I see you're sincere, so I'm going to give you a chapter.'"

And so this spring, Pink Heals Eastern Alabama bought its own pink fire truck.

"I love helping. If I can do something to lift somebody up, make them smile, that's what I like doing," Wilson said.

"Ours is a real pretty truck. It's got two big ol' pink bows on the front of it," he said. When people see the pink truck coming down the road, they'll wave and take pictures.

The truck was purchased from the national Pink Heals organization. It was previously a touring truck stationed in

Jacksonville, Fla.

Now based in Calhoun County, the truck can travel as far as Auburn, Montgomery and Pell City.

For now, however, the fire-engine-pink truck has been making appearances close to home, including this month's Fast Feet Breast Cancer 5K at the Anniston Aquatic Center.

"People can sign our truck, have pictures made with it," Wilson said. "We talk to them, try to lift them up."

The pink truck was scheduled to appear at the Venecia's Foundation 5K run in Piedmont, but Wilson got an emergency call about a house fire and had to respond to it instead. (He took the regular fire truck to the house fire.)

The pink truck can also be booked for

personal or home visits. It was recently scheduled for a visit with an 83-year-old woman in Oxford before a chemo treatment.

The pink truck is available to support those suffering from any life-threatening disease, not just breast cancer. Wilson said he is starting to reach out to Clay County, Talladega and Heflin to let them know the pink truck is available to visit those areas.

You can follow the adventures of the pink truck on the Pink Heals Eastern Alabama Facebook page. To book an appearance by the truck, call B.R. Wilson at 256-310-0252.

Lisa Davis is Features Editor of The Anniston Star. Contact her at 256-235-3555 or ldavis@annistonstar.com.

Piedmont charity aims to flush cancer

What started as an inside joke between Venecia Butler and her friends became a rallying cry and the name of a fundraiser.

"Cancer is crap," said Randa Carroll, the younger sister of the late Butler, who died in 2015 after her fourth bout with cancer. "The ones that get it, know it,

and they agree."

Today, the largest fundraiser for Venecia's Foundation is the annual 5K "Crap Run" in downtown Piedmont. The nonprofit foundation was set up by Butler and family in 2013.

Venecia's Foundation packs bags for cancer patients undergoing

chemotherapy, including comforts such as blankets, pillows, a journal and crossword puzzle book. The bags also contain a large bottle of Lubriderm lotion — a specific request of Butler, who preferred the lotion over off-brand alternatives.

Carroll, the president of Venecia's

Foundation, said the organization continues to run in honor of Butler. "We continued the foundation in her honor and memory because it was so important to her."

For more information on Venecia's Foundation, visit veneciasfoundation.org.

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Beyoncé’s father, Mathew Knowles, on his breast cancer diagnosis

BY DERRICK BRYSON TAYLOR
The New York Times

Mathew Knowles, the father and former manager of Beyoncé and Solange, revealed recently that he received treatment for breast cancer this year, becoming one of the rare men to face the disease.

Knowles, 67, a music executive who teaches sports events and entertainment marketing at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, spoke with ABC’s “Good Morning America” and The New York Times about his experience.

About 245,000 women in the United States learn they have breast cancer each year, compared with about 2,200 men, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The disease kills about 41,000 women and 460 men in the country each year.

Knowles first noticed something was wrong in July, when drops of blood kept showing up on his shirts, he told The Times. “Imagine a piece of white paper and you took a red pen and just put a dot,” he said. “That’s what it looked like in my T-shirt.”

Knowles watched the pattern for three days and began to question if it was his medication or his workout regimen that was causing the blood to appear.

Then Gena Avery Knowles, his wife of six years, also noticed blood on their bedsheets, he said.

“So, I squeezed my nipple and sure enough, a little discharge came out, bloody discharge,” he said. “I immediately called my doctor.”

Knowles’ doctor performed a blood smear test, which came up inconclusive, he said. A mammogram then showed that he had stage 1A breast cancer. He had a mastectomy that same month, July, and said his recovery was “fairly easy.”

“They also took out three lymph nodes” to see if the cancer had spread in his body, he said. “It had not.”

Doctors conducted a test that revealed he had a BRCA2 gene mutation, which increases certain cancer risks, Knowles said, noting that he had urged both of his daughters to have the same test done. Knowles was previously married to their mother, Tina Knowles Lawson, for 33 years before they separated in 2009. The divorce was finalized in 2011.

“My two daughters have an increased chance in having breast cancer,” he said. “They have an increased chance of ovarian cancer. And it goes down to grandkids.”

Everyone has the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, which work as tumor suppressors, but mutations of them



David Swanson/The Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS

Beyonce’s father, Mathew Knowles, has revealed that he has hereditary breast cancer.

can increase the risk of breast cancer, Dr. Alice Police, a regional director of breast surgery for the Northwell Health Cancer Institute, said. When the BRCA2 gene has a mutation in men, she said, they are at a higher risk of prostate cancer, breast cancer, pancreatic cancer and melanoma.

Knowles said that he and his wife, Gena, each had several family members who had died from breast cancer.

“Family history in male breast cancer is really, extremely important,” Police said. “It’s probably more important than it is in female breast cancer because male breast cancer is so rare.” She treats two to four cases of male breast cancer each year and said that warning signs could include a lump in the breast, a bloody nipple discharge or any changes in the nipple.

Knowles plans to undergo a second mastectomy in January to reduce his risk and will have mammograms every six months, he said.

Racial disparities in breast cancer also exist, but most of the data is on cases involving women, Police said.

Rates of breast cancer among black and white women are about the same,

“Family history in male breast cancer is really, extremely important.”
— Mathew Knowles

but the mortality rate is higher for black women because the disease is more likely to be caught at a later stage, she said. Black men with breast cancer also tend to have a worse prognosis, according to the American Cancer Society.

Black women are more likely to have an aggressive, less treatable type of breast cancer called triple negative breast cancer. And they lag white women in diagnosis of estrogen-receptor positive disease, the most treatable form of breast cancer.

One in 833 men are at risk of getting breast cancer in their lifetime, according to the group. The disease is nearly 100 times as common among white women as it is for white men, and 70 times as common among black women

as it is for black men.

Police said that some men don’t realize they have breast tissue and should be examined if they experience symptoms. “A lot of men are just embarrassed to walk into a breast center where everything is pink and it’s filled with women,” she said. “They feel like somehow it makes them less of a man or less masculine to walk into a center and get checked out.”

Knowles, who also urged men to get checked, echoed that sentiment and suggested that “chest cancer” might be a more apt term than “breast cancer” for men who are uncomfortable.

“Make it easy,” he said. “That’s the barrier for men. They just can’t get past that word.”

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Photos by Cameron Christopher

From left, Temecha Williams, Shandrika Christopher and Jackie Judkins.

QUEENS

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been looking forward to the weekend with her family. Instead, she called her husband, her mom and her sister to come to the hospital. "I was by myself, boo-hooing. I couldn't stop crying," she said.

When she was officially diagnosed, her doctor told her, "It's cancer, but you're going to be fine. I know you're scared, but you're going to be fine."

That was Sept. 13, 2018. Her nursing school instructors said she could stop school and start back up in January. Instead, she told them she would continue "as long as I can hold my head up."

On Sept. 26, she had a chemo port put in.

On Sept. 27, she did eight hours of clinicals in Birmingham.

On Oct. 3, she started chemo.

On Dec. 18, she graduated with her class.

Earlier this year, she had a double mastectomy. "They said I could just do a lumpectomy, but I said no," she said. She is planning to have a preventive hysterectomy later this year.

"I lost all my girl parts, but I'm still here," Williams said. "I just wanted this disease gone — for my three kids."

Williams' son Tremon Smith, 23, was drafted by the NFL last year and is now with the Green Bay Packers. She also has a 15-year-old daughter and an 11-year-old son.

"I did the 'why me?' I thought everything was going good in my life. I'd gone back to college. My son was doing well. Then BAM!" she said.

"This really brought me out of my shell. I was always the one taking care of people."

...

Jackie Judkins, 48, had always had lumpy breasts, due to fibrocystic breast disease, a benign condition. When she was 18, she'd felt a lump. It was biopsied. It was nothing. In 2015, she'd felt another lump. It was biopsied. It was nothing.

This year, when she felt yet another lump in her right breast, she assumed

it would also turn out to be nothing.

But this time it was Stage 2 invasive ductal carcinoma.

When she was diagnosed, she thought, "OK, God, here I am. I'm yours. It's your will. I can't change it."

She opted for a double mastectomy. "I was trying to avoid chemo, so I said, 'Just cut my babies off. I'm good with me.'"

Judkins wound up doing 12 weeks of chemo anyway. Her last treatment was in September.

The hair loss that accompanied chemo was tough on all three women. "I was loving my big afro," Judkins said. When her hair started falling out, "I cried big alligator tears. Then God said to me, 'It's just hair.' I started laughing, and I felt the peace of God. I thought, 'I love wearing wraps. I'm wearing a wrap to church on Sunday.'"

During her treatment, she never missed a day of work at Anniston Army Depot.

"There are a lot of females out there scared to get checked because they can't take off work, or because they've heard stories about chemo. That makes me so angry," Judkins said.

"You may hear a story about somebody's bad chemo, but that's not necessarily YOUR story. Make your own story."

...

While all three women were going through cancer treatment, they all found themselves with extra burdens. Williams was diagnosed a few days before her son was scheduled to play his first NFL game. Judkins' brother had a massive stroke, and she took him in to care for him. One month after Christopher was diagnosed, her mother passed away.

"You have to find your strength," Christopher said. "You have to find your will to live. God will bring you through it."

Above all: "Get your mammograms. Do your self-checks. And if you get that diagnosis, look at us. It's not the end."

Lisa Davis is Features Editor of The Anniston Star. Contact her at 256-235-3555 or ldavis@annistonstar.com.



Photos by Cameron Christopher

BLACK WOMEN AND BREAST CANCER

The following facts come from the American Cancer Society and Sisters Network, a national African American breast cancer survivorship organization:

- Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in black women.
- Breast cancer deaths are second only to lung cancer deaths among black women.
- An estimated 33,840 new cases are expected to be diagnosed in 2019.
- An estimated 6,540 deaths from breast cancer are expected to occur among black women in 2019.
- Breast cancer deaths among black women have declined since 1991 due to improved early detection and treatment, yet black women are 42 percent more likely to die of breast cancer than white women.
- While 92 percent of black women agree breast health is important, only 25 percent have recently discussed breast health with their family, friends or colleagues. Only 17 percent have taken steps to understand their risk for breast cancer.
- Black women are less likely to undergo DNA testing for genetic mutations, even though the rate of BRCA mutations is higher among black women than for white women.
- Black women are often at a more advanced stage upon detection.
- Black women may not have access to health care or health insurance so may have longer intervals between mammograms.
- Because they may not have insurance, black women may not follow up on abnormal mammogram results because they can't afford the diagnostic testing.
- Black women have twice the odds of getting Triple Negative Breast Cancer, an aggressive kind of breast cancer with a high mortality rate.

Pink.

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We believe in a cure, and in the human spirit's ability to overcome great adversity. Until the day comes when we are free from the threat of breast cancer, education and awareness are of the utmost importance. Early detection saves lives. Join us as we fight to build a world with more birthdays, for our generation and for the future.

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mechanisms for carrying out these effects that would not interfere with one another."

Tollefsbol and his team identified two compounds in common foods that are known to have success in cancer prevention and that could potentially be combined to successfully "turn on" the ER gene in ER-negative breast cancer so that the cancer could be treated with estrogen receptor inhibitors such as tamoxifen.

"One way we can use epigenetics as a powerful tool to fight cancer is through compounds found in our everyday diet," Tollefsbol said. "Vegetables, for example, are filled with these types of compounds. Your mother always told you to eat your vegetables, and science now tells us she was right."

Another compound found in green tea has been shown to stimulate epigenetic changes in cancerous genes, according to prior studies from Tollefsbol's lab.

These compounds, used in the right way, can help modulate gene expression aberrations that are contributing to the disease.

The researchers found that a combination of dietary plant-derived compounds consisting of sulforaphane from cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli sprouts, along with polyphenols from green tea, is successful in preventing and treating ER-negative breast cancer in mice that are genetically programmed to develop ER-negative breast cancer at high rates.

Further investigation revealed that the mechanism for the efficacy of these two dietary compounds involved epigenetic changes induced in the ER gene regulatory region.

With the combined dietary treatment the researchers administered, the tumors in the mice were converted from ER-negative to ER-positive cancers. This rendered the breast cancer easily treatable with tamoxifen, an estrogen receptor inhibitor.

"The results of this research provide a novel approach to preventing and treating ER-negative breast cancer, which currently takes hundreds of thousands of lives worldwide," said Li. "The next step would be to move this to clinical trial, and to eventually be able to provide more effective treatment options for women either predisposed to or afflicted with this deadly disease."

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FACTS

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♀ **WOMEN 268,600** new cases of invasive breast cancer

♂ **MEN 2,670** new cases of invasive breast cancer

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