



## 'MEN GET BREAST CANCER, TOO!'

When Theron Bell was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1976, he hadn't known that men could get the disease. Now, more than 30 years later, he's survived five recurrences and is helping to spread the word

about male breast cancer to other men. He spoke with *AJN* recently about his experiences.

Bell, who has held appointed positions in the areas of economic development and community relations, among others, in the administrations of four U.S. presidents, was just shy of 45 and living in New York City when he first noticed a lump in his right breast. A biopsy revealed a malignant mass, and Bell's physician ordered him to undergo a radical mastectomy with removal of all axillary lymph nodes on the right side, and a modified mastectomy on the left side as a precaution. Told that he had a 50–50 chance of survival, Bell says he replied, "Well, that's as good as or better than stepping out into New York City traffic."

Between 1978 and 1984, and now living in Washington, DC, Bell suffered three recurrences. He underwent surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, all the while hiding his illness from coworkers. He tried to remain optimistic: "I went to work every day and told myself, 'I can beat this thing.'"

Some years passed before Bell had yet another recurrence, this time requiring major surgery. When a skin graft on his right breast failed, Bell found himself with an open wound that constantly leaked fluids. Depression set in. He called the American Cancer Society to ask if there was a support group for male breast cancer survivors. After being addressed as "Mrs. Bell," he was told there was none. He says now, "It disturbed me that there was no place for men to go."

In June 1996 Bell was undergoing reconstructive chest surgery when the surgeon found more cancer. This time three ribs were removed, and the muscle from the back of Bell's right shoulder was moved to under his arm and used to create a flap to protect his right chest wall. It was the last surgery he'd need.

Bell was unpacking in his new home in Littleton, Colorado, in September 1999 when he was contacted

by a Denver television station looking for men with breast cancer to interview. Although Bell had long hidden his illness from coworkers and family, he said yes; it marked a significant change in his outlook. He told *AJN*, "I realized I'd been selfish in not wanting anyone to know, in not talking about it." He began lining up speaking engagements, mostly at local churches, to talk about how male breast cancer affects those who get it and their families. "People don't realize the impact this disease has on spouses and families," he said. "The man is often the head of the household, and if the spouse isn't working, the financial situation is bad."

While reactions to Bell's story vary, most people (both men and women) are surprised to learn that men can get breast cancer. "Awareness hasn't gotten better in 30 years," he says. "Most men don't even think about it." He believes this is probably why there are few groups dedicated to male breast cancer: "I've been trying to put together a group in Colorado," he says. "One or two come out of the closet, but that's the extent of it." Bell chalks this up, in part, to shame. "I hid it because I didn't want my coworkers to know I was sick," he says. "But other men think of it as a 'women's issue' and are ashamed to bring it up."

Still, spreading the word has had positive effects. Some men, after hearing Bell speak, have told him that they go home and perform monthly breast self-examinations. "A few have said, 'Thanks to you, I found a lump and went to the doctor, but it was diagnosed as OK.'"

Bell still takes tamoxifen and has regular checkups, and the cancer hasn't returned in over 10 years. Today he serves on the board of the John W. Nick Foundation ([www.malebreastcancer.org](http://www.malebreastcancer.org)), an organization dedicated to increasing male breast cancer awareness through education and research. Bell acknowledges that obtaining funding is difficult, and believes this is because the number of U.S. deaths annually from male breast cancer is small—around 480. But he adds, "Many men don't get physicals—so we don't know the real numbers."

Despite these challenges, Bell has made raising public awareness of male breast cancer his life's work. He reiterated, "Breast cancer is not limited to women, and early detection of breast cancer in men can save lives." —Amy M. Collins, associate editor