

SHIRLEY COOK - 2001 HONORARY SURVIVOR CHAIR

Shirley Cook walked into her first breast cancer support group meeting, only to be hit with the realization: She was the lone African-American in the room.

It wasn't the first time she had felt loneliness and isolation amid all the camaraderie and support of women battling breast cancer. The feeling had nagged at her since the day she learned she had breast cancer at age 43. It had continued through the removal of 16 cancerous lymph nodes and her left breast, to the onset of six months of chemotherapy and the prospect of six weeks of energy-zapping radiation.

"I kept thinking, 'Am I the only African-American in the Quad Cities that has breast cancer?'" recalls Cook, now 52. "You see, I had never heard of an African-American lady with breast cancer. My husband, Steven, said 'Maybe you need to do some investigating.'"

So she did and discovered minority women with breast cancer, suffering in silence because of cultures that keep such topics private. She found women who weren't getting mammograms or giving themselves breast self-exams -- either because they felt ashamed or because they had never been taught their importance. That's when she and a friend decided to found a support group for minority women called Project Hope.

Because of her breast cancer awareness efforts in the minority community, Cook has been selected as the Honorary Survivor Chair for the 12th Annual Komen Quad Cities Race for the Cure®, to be held Saturday, June 9, in the John Deere Commons area of downtown Moline.

The distinction quite aptly reflects her life's ultimate accomplishment, she says. "I really believe that my proudest achievement is that I'm a breast cancer survivor," says Cook, a mother of four sons. "It's a victory for me. I feel now is the time to talk about what happened to me and reach other minority women who are quietly dealing with breast cancer."

"African-American women have learned to suffer in silence," she says. "Many of the ladies with breast cancer are still very hush-hush about it. Cancer still has a stigma. We have to break that barrier."

In 1996, she and an African-American friend who had been diagnosed with leukemia formed a support group called Project Hope for minority women with cancer. To find these silent sufferers, they went to churches and sought others who were going through the same ordeal. Ironically, they all had breast cancer.

"There's a great need for education regarding self-exams and all the risk factors for minority women," Cook says. "For whatever reason, they're not aware of them. It's very important for mothers to start at a young age, telling their daughters that it's OK to do breast self-exams."

To keep that mindset at the forefront, Cook and the Project Hope group hosted the first Little Miss Pink Ribbon Pageant last year. Thirteen minority girls joined the pageant, which was merely a backdrop to instill breast cancer awareness in the minds of young girls and their mothers. In fact, one of their first activities was to participate in the Komen Quad Cities Race for a Cure®.

"We took the girls to Genesis Medical Center, showed them the mammogram machines and let them talk to nurses," Cook says. "It was a wonderful experience; there were mothers there who had never had a mammogram. Even the fathers came."

Cook is always saddened to hear of women who are too ashamed to reveal they have breast cancer. That's because family and community support has been her lifeline.

In 1992, a lump under her arm changed her life. At first, she thought it was an allergic reaction to deodorant and disregarded it for six or seven months until it became too uncomfortable. Doctors told her it was an egg-sized mass, the result of breast cancer that had spread and invaded 16 lymph nodes.

"When the doctor called me and said that the results were positive, I wanted to deny it," she says. "I had to ask him three times. Then I hung up the phone, walked a few feet away and fainted into one of my son's arms."

There were a lot of tears that day. She and the two sons who still lived at home piled into the car and drove to her husband's workplace. "We picked him up, drove home, and we all sat down and cried together," Cook says. "From that day, my husband has listened and been there for me. When I went through chemotherapy, he would get off work, and sit and hold me when I was sick. He would feed me my Jello."

Cook stresses that she had no family history of breast cancer, conscientiously had her first mammogram at age 36 and lived a healthy lifestyle. "Don't think that just because breast cancer is not in your family, you're not at risk," she warns. "There are no boundaries to this disease."

At her first Komen Quad Cities Race for the Cure®, Cook remembers having that same feeling: "Where are the African-American women? Where are they hidden?" She hopes to see more minorities participate in the uplifting race.

"Komen Quad Cities Race for the Cure® sends a wonderful message," she says. "We're letting people know we're in a fight against breast cancer, and it's a fight we're going to win. You can see it on the faces of the survivors - it's the greatest feeling that you've ever had."