

The Renee Davis Story:

Persevering Against All Odds

By Kia Smith

At 54-years-old, Renee Davis appears to have a perfect life. She's a wife, a mother, a model and an activist. Her physical beauty is flawless and is only outshined by her amazing inner beauty. Yet her perfect world hasn't always been so perfect. Through much determination and perseverance, Davis has overcome cancer, homelessness and poverty to arrive at a place of joy, contentment and purpose.



Perseverance is a priceless virtue. Everyone should be able to persevere and overcome difficult situations, yet few people are truly capable of doing so. Renee Davis is one individual who has emerged through the fires of life to stand as the epitome of perseverance and a living example of God's faithfulness.

In 1999, Davis was diagnosed with breast cancer. While cancer can be a life-shattering obstacle for many women, Davis refused to allow cancer to rock her world. When she noticed

the lump in her breast during a routine self-breast exam, she wasn't too startled. "I have cystic breasts," explained Davis. "I knew which were cysts and which were not anything to worry about."

Each time Davis noticed a new lump, her physician would examine it. Usually he would either aspirate it or simply tell her to watch it closely, but this time she knew something was different.

Davis struggled for words to explain what she had experienced

before simply stating, "Christians understand. This time when I felt a lump, in my spirit, I heard the Lord say, 'This is different,' and I wasn't afraid. He let me know that it was cancer, but it was not until death."

Questioning what she had heard in her spirit, Davis scheduled a doctor's appointment without revealing to the doctor, her family or friends what she had heard from God.

Her doctor's visit went similarly to her previous ones. Dr. Joel

Okoli, a surgeon with Grady Health Systems, first attempted to aspirate, or remove, any fluid from the lump. He was unable to do so. Based upon Davis' history, he decided to perform a biopsy.

"[This] would have been my third biopsy in my life, [so it was] no big deal. But I still knew what I heard in my spirit," Davis stated.

Upon removing the small lump, Dr. Okoli noted that it did not appear cancerous, but it was sent to a pathologist for further testing anyway. The next week, upon receiving the pathology report, Dr. Okoli informed Davis that her lump was in fact cancerous.

"I know. The Spirit of the Lord already told me that," Davis said. "I'm not afraid. What do we need to do?"

Pleasantly surprised with Davis' reaction, Dr. Okoli shared with Davis possible courses of action. Because the cancer was detected early, she underwent a lumpectomy and six to eight weeks of radiation, and in Davis' words, "That's all it really was."

Strength from Where?

Each year approximately 200,000 women in America are diagnosed with breast cancer, but few are able to face cancer with the strength, dignity and fearlessness that Davis did. When asked where her impeccable strength came from, Davis credited her mother. "It was truly the strength that God gave my mom. I watched her go through so much and still come through smelling like a rose."

From a young age, Davis watched her mom battle and overcome a number of health problems. In 1957, while pregnant with Davis' sister, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, and in 1968, doctors informed her that she had breast cancer. After undergoing a double mastectomy and appearing to be in good health, the breast cancer came back—this time in residual tissue. Several years later she underwent a quintuple bypass before being diagnosed with multiple melanoma, another form of cancer.

"I see my mom going through all of this, but she comes out, gets well, helps others and gets hit





again,” Davis said. “She doesn’t let it knock her down, so I’m saying

it’s not going to be easy, but if mom could do it, this little lump is no big deal. So the strength first was through my mother, and then when both of us came to know the Lord, we were like, ‘this is really where our strength comes from.’”

Fighting Cancer, but Worried about Finances

While fighting cancer was no problem for Davis, she was extremely concerned about her financial situation. “I was going through a difficult period in my

life,” Davis explained. “I had lost my job, had no more health insurance and was basically homeless. My children and I were living with friend to friend, in boarding houses and in extended stay motels—all that kind of stuff. Now I get hit with cancer, and that didn’t scare me as much as [me thinking], ‘I don’t have insurance. How am I going to pay for this?’ That freaked me out.” But as the Lord would have it, everything fell into place.

An employee at Grady Health Systems assisted Davis in applying for a state aid program, which she soon received. This covered

medicine, surgery and other medical expenses she incurred while battling breast cancer. About a year later, she was able to become a part of another special program for women battling cancer. “So God had taken care of it, and I got excellent care from Grady,” Davis shared.

Sustained from Above

One thing Davis is sure of is that she was sustained from above. “Dr. Joel Okoli is a Christian. Before he put me under he prayed. He had everyone in the operating room pray. I could see the nurses going, ‘What?’” It may have appeared odd to some, but Davis knows “when you have to go through something that the Lord is allowing, He will sustain you. He will make sure that you are taken care of by His own, and that’s what I found out the whole time.”

Beauty is Her Name

In 1999 when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer, Davis’ modeling career was just beginning to blossom. Modeling was not a part of Davis’ original plans. It was simply a door God opened to assist her in difficult times.

“My daughter was doing a back to school fashion show, and when I took her for her fitting the lady said, ‘Oh, do you model?’ I’m thinking, ‘Pay check. Feed kids. Yeah, I can do that,’” Davis laughed as she reminisced. Soon she was booking more and more jobs, and before she knew it, she was appearing on the pages of Essence magazine.

“I just saw it as God’s way of helping me feed my kids, and it’s turned into something else. I would like to say it’s a min-

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istry,” said Davis, who uses her exposure on the runways to show women they can have a life after 40, overcome homelessness, outlive cancer and look glamorous doing so.

When sharing her beauty secrets, Davis first acknowledges that beauty shines from the inside out—starting with our spirit. Davis encourages others to establish a firm spiritual foundation to help overcome the stresses of life that cause signs of premature aging. “You’re going to have all kinds of attacks—all kinds of onslaughts on who you are spiritually and mentally. Make sure that you are prepared for that through prayer, reading the Word, being around positive people, going to church and hearing the Word,” encouraged Davis.

Filling your spirit with the correct things does no good if you are bombarded with things

designed to tear you down Davis states. Guard your mind from negative people and negative thoughts in all forms (i.e. music, television, phone calls, etc.).

Recognizing who you are and who you represent will also ensure that you place your best foot forward according to Davis. If you don’t represent Jesus, find something to take pride in, whether it’s your family, school or an organization, and do everything you can to portray a positive image of who you are representing.

After taking care of the spiritual, it’s important to be aware of the foods you put inside your body. “I tell young girls and women that you can’t expect to put makeup on a canvas that’s flawed. If you’re not eating properly it’ll show up on the outside,” Davis said. Individuals should cut back on preservatives, artificial

sugars and fast foods and eat more fruits and vegetables and make sure they are taking the proper vitamins and supplements to maintain a balance diet.

Davis’ third step to never-ending beauty is good hygiene. A beautiful appearance requires proper cleansing of skin, hair and nails, regular doctor and dentist’s appointments and a little make-up as well. “It’s not all natural,” Davis stated as she wittedly smiled across the table. “Enhance the beauty that God gave you. Don’t over do it, but cover up the age spots and the freckles you don’t like. And there’s nothing wrong with dying your gray or growing it out. It’s a personal choice.”

God’s Hands on the Earth

Davis’ life hasn’t exactly been a cakewalk, but she’s determined to use her experiences to help



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others. "I firmly believe in helping. We are God's hands on this earth, so those things that we go through, we have to help others as they go through the same things," Davis explained.

Davis plans to focus her energies on two issues: 1) helping homeless women and children and 2) helping women and girls reach their fullest potential. She knows that God allowed her to endure her difficult housing situation for a reason, and that situation has birthed in her the desire to help other homeless women. To give back to women in this situation, Davis serves on boards, reviews grants and works with a number of non-profit organizations. Despite these duties, she desires to do more. "I want to open an emergency shelter. The need for emergency shelter in Atlanta is so great."

Recently, Davis was extremely close to fulfilling her dream. She received a \$325,000 grant and had plans of renting a home from a local church and transforming it into an emergency shelter. Unfortunately, this oppor-

tunity fell through once it was discovered that changes in zoning ordinances prevented her from using the property as a shelter.

Davis has not allowed this detour to destroy her plans. She is presently pursuing other opportunities that will ensure her emer-

Expert Quote

"A screening test tries to find a disease before there are any symptoms. With breast cancer, there's a misconception that if you feel fine, don't have a lump, and have no family history of breast cancer, you're okay. The truth is that three-quarters of the women in whom we find breast cancer have no risk factors. So screening is important for everyone."

—Susan Orel, M.D.

gency shelter will open.

Davis also spends time speaking to women and young girls about loving themselves and becoming the person they were created to be. "I would like to

be able to make a mark-to help women, and girls especially, recognize true beauty." said Davis. "Let them know they can be who they are and be beautiful. They don't have to aspire to be me or Halle Berry. They are fearfully and wonderfully made and every one of us looks different."

The Key to Perseverance...

According to Davis, the key to perseverance is not found in your personal hopes and dreams. "The key to perseverance is recognizing that you are not here for yourself. You have to understand that no matter how hard it gets or how much you might want to quit, it's not up to you. [God] has created us for a purpose, and we've got to stay here until our purpose is completed. "You're here for a reason, so when it's difficult, recognize 'It's not about me'."

*For more information on Renee Davis, please visit www.reneedavis.com. You can also find Davis in the upcoming movie, *Dirty Laundry* starring Loretta Devine and Jenifer Lewis.*

According to the Centers for Disease Control

After certain skin cancers, breast cancer is the common cancer in women despite race or ethnicity.

- Breast cancer is the sixth leading cause of death among women.
- In 2003, the most recent numbers available, state 181,646 women and 1,826 men developed breast cancer. That same year, 41,619 women and 379 men died from breast cancer.

- Early detection is the key to overcoming breast cancer. Breast self exams, clinical exams and mammograms should be performed regularly to ensure early detection.

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov, www.komen.org, www.breastcancer.org or www.cancer.org.