

Diahann Carroll: Movie star, cancer survivor

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Diahann Carroll – – screen goddess, Black television icon, singer and now cancer survivor. Since she was diagnosed with breast cancer eight years ago, Carroll said, her life has been changed. Now, she is sharing her story of triumph as the spokeswoman for the Star Campaign, a Web-based initiative of the Wellness Community, an international, non-profit organization dedicated to providing free cancer support, education, and hope for all people living with cancer, that seeks to honor caregivers in the lives of cancer patients.

In a one-on-one interview, Carroll spoke with the AFRO about her cancer experience and her work with the organization.

AFRO: You have played some strong roles throughout your film career, most recently on the television show "Grey's Anatomy," is that the same Diahann Carroll off screen?

DC: *I am strong, I suppose. I think to be in show business for a period of over 50 years it does take a kind of inner strength. Yes, I would admit to that.*

AFRO: How did you deal with your bout with [breast] cancer? Can you take me back to that moment when you found out you had the disease?

DC: *It was a very difficult thing to believe at first. One tries to deny what they have just heard. And eventually, in my case, there was a depression but, then I decided to become a spokesperson about how I handled my particular radiation and try to demystify [the process.] I went along because there was so little I knew about how one takes the proper treatment and gathers together the team of doctors that will help you and give support-mental as well as medical-while you go through the process. So I talk about it and speak about it and share what I went through hoping that it would be of some help to others.*

AFRO: Can you tell me some more about the toll it took on you physically and emotionally?

DC: *Emotionally, of course, it threatens many things. The first thing you think about is life--am I going to die? When we hear the word "cancer" that's what most of us think about immediately. And the other thing is how does it affect my family? And it becomes important to address my professional life and what does it mean in terms of how I am perceived and whether it would affect employment.*



AFRO: What potential damage to your career did you see in the way you could possibly be treated as a cancer survivor?

DC: *Well, the entire business that I live and work in is built upon your attractiveness; your ability to represent something that is really unrealistic, live out a fairy tale is what I do. So this became something that was very realistic, that my body had suffered from, let's say, a virus (because we're not really sure what cancer is), and did that make me less desirable? The bottom line is there is a seduction of some sort whenever one is in this industry.*

AFRO: What has the last eight years been like, from finding out you had the disease to going through the treatments then getting your life back together after the fact?

DC: *I think the most important thing that one has to recognize is that [cancer] cannot monopolize your thoughts and your...it will certainly monopolize your time as you go through treatments but then it's necessary to say, 'I've had it, I've been very fortunate, and to really, without sounding as though I live with cliches, move on and not dwell on the fact that you have had this illness and sometimes moving on is exactly what will make you stronger of mind and stronger of body because your involvement with what is good and what is not for your health becomes more intense.*

AFRO: But how do you move on when there is the hanging threat that this can recur?

DC: *When I say move on, I mean move on. There's nothing you can do if cancer is going to reoccur so you have to accept it when that happens. But to dwell on the fact that it might reoccur is a negative. So you place it to the side and you move on with the things in your life that would bring you happiness and that you can share with your family.*

AFRO: Would you speak about your involvement with the Star Campaign? Why did you decide to become the spokeswoman for this organization?

DC: *Because I think they do wonderful work. And I'm very proud to be part of people who reach out to help wherever it is possible to help.... Perhaps it makes me feel as if I have managed somehow to find a positive way to move on.*

AFRO: Do you believe the caretakers of cancer patients get the recognition they deserve?

DC: *No. We tend to dwell on the negative and strange behavior and things that don't add very positive to our lives. That's what the news is filled with most of the time. [The news concentrates on the lives of people like Britney Spears and Paris Hilton]. It's a waste, but it gets the ratings. Therefore, people who are really important, who are making life more pleasant receive less attention from the media.*

AFRO: So you see this organization as putting a more positive face on cancer.

DC: *Yes I do.*

AFRO: Do you have a personal star that helped you through your experience?

DC: *Mostly friends. Of course I had staff, but mostly friends; that is what I will always remember. My female friends decided that each day of my radiation treatments, which lasted for approximately 12 weeks, that they would organize for us to have lunch together. And they would trade positions-'I will do it on Wednesday, why don't you try Friday?'-it was wonderful to have that kind of support. And it also prevented me from dwelling on the fact that I was going through cancer treatment.*

AFRO: Thank you so much Ms. Carroll for speaking with me today; this has been a pleasure. Good luck and I look forward to seeing you again in whatever new project you're working on.

DC: Thank you.