

Phenomenal Indiana Woman: Nikia D. Garland

By Shawnta S. Barnes – March 15, 2018



Nikia D. Garland at the Pink Ribbon Celebration Survivor's Luncheon

Nikia 'Nikki' D. Garland is in her 17th year as a high school English teacher. This Broad Ripple Alum currently teaches at her alma mater. Three years ago, a diagnosis helped this educator extend her impact and reach beyond the classroom.

“One day I was doing a self-check and found a tiny lump. It took me a month to work up the courage to go to my general physician,” Garland shared. After an ultrasound, mammogram, and two biopsies, in May 2015, Nikia received a call while teaching at Broad Ripple. “The office of the surgeon who biopsied my breast contacted me while I was at work. The lady on the line stated that I needed to schedule an appointment with the surgical oncologist to ‘get those cells out of there,’” Garland recalled. “I left and went home. An extreme fear swept over me. I was terrified of dying. I was already a widow. Who would care for my children?” Later, on June 1, 2015, Garland met with an oncologist and received her breast cancer diagnosis.

At first, Garland thought she would have a lumpectomy, but after further evaluation, her doctor informed her, the plan needed to change to a mastectomy. “I had never missed the beginning of the school year. The day before the surgery, I had to meet with the plastic surgeon. He marked me up and I just cried and cried.” Garland had her first surgery July 14, 2015. Because she was disappointed her first surgery caused her to miss the beginning of the school year, she had her reconstructive surgeries throughout the school year during fall break, winter break, and spring break to ensure she would not miss another moment with her students.

Psalms 46:10 NKJV, “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” was the scripture that kept Garland anchored during this difficult time. While battling cancer Nikia came across John Piper’s pamphlet, “Don’t Waste Your Cancer.” She knew she could use her story to bless others. “I am a very private person and I struggled to tell my story. If God didn’t want me to have breast cancer, He could have stopped the cells from spreading,” Garland explained. “My best friend Cherrell Rice-Jones died from breast cancer and sharing my story is a way to carry on her legacy and to glorify God.”



Susan G. Komen Project Pink Fashion Show

Next, Garland became a Susan G. Komen Ambassador where she represented the organization during the months that led up to Race for the Cure. After she completed her ambassadorship April 2017, she joined Sisters in Pink, a new program that began July 2017, where she serves as a Breast Health Educator. “Sisters in Pink is targeted to black women to address the disparity between the death of black and white women from breast cancer. Although black women are not as likely to get breast cancer as white women, when they do have it, they tend to have the more aggressive forms of the disease such as triple negative,” Garland explained.



Nikia D. Garland and her senior girls advisory class preparing package for Race for the Cure.

Even her students have been involved in her work. She took her advisory senior girls class to volunteer at Print Resources. This is the business that produces materials for Race for the Cure. Garland recalled, “We assembled the packages and boxed them up for the team and individual pick up. It was a good learning experience. They asked how they could volunteer throughout the year.”

One barrier Garland has faced is getting an audience in the black community. “Breast cancer has a stigma, especially in the black community. People don’t want to talk about bad things especially since cancer is associated with death.” Despite the barriers she has faced, Garland

believes she is making a difference. Recently, she spoke at the Pink Ribbon Celebration Survivor's Luncheon. "I spoke a couple Sundays ago and about 20 people told me how impactful my speech was. I have supported a former colleague. I shared my story with a former student who was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer. I just try to keep people uplifted."

Garland has been cancer-free for two years and nine months and has this advice for women:

Women need to do self-breast checks. Most insurance companies won't cover the cost of a mammogram before the age of 40. You also need to have regular check-ups so your doctor can do the clinical exam. Be educated about breast cancer. Two months before I found that lump, I heard a guy tell a story about his father dying of cancer in his thirties. I thought, if anything, I would have diabetes because of my family history. I wasn't educated enough to know that you don't have to have a family history or have to have the BRCA (breast cancer) gene. I would never have thought I would get cancer. I was 37 when I received my diagnosis. The median age is 62 and fewer than 5% of women under 40 are diagnosed. You need to know your body.

During Women's History Month, we salute this phenomenal Indiana woman and her work to support women during their breast cancer journey and to inform women about breast health.

Nikia D. Garland offers [breast health presentations](#) free of charge.

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Also, check out this phenomenal woman:

[Phenomenal Indiana Woman: Cherie Sanders](#)