Cancer Health™

Community

Patient advocate Deltra James, 35, lives in Waterbury, Connecticut, with her five children. She has metastatic breast cancer.

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With just three words—You have cancer—I was suddenly transported to this island, separate from the land of the healthy and those who get to carry on living as if they'll be around forever. It was the summer of 2019, and I had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

I'd never felt so alone.

I quickly realized, however, that my family and closest friends were joining me here.

Soon, I allowed myself to connect with the other members of Cancer Land and started to feel far less alone. These were my people now, the ones who understood what I was about to go through. As the saying goes, it's the worst club, but it has the best members.

A few weeks later, though, I learned that I had Stage IV metastatic breast cancer (MBC) de novo, meaning it wasn't a recurrence. It just showed up throughout my body, full-blown.

Wrapping your mind around a diagnosis like mine isn't easy. It takes time, and, with five children, time isn't something I have a lot of.

My feelings of isolation grew.

Now, even on this island with others experiencing cancer, I felt like part of an outcast group. This is the experience of many of us living with MBC. It's easy to feel the disconnect even from other cancer patients who are early stagers and focused on getting to survivorship. I don't get to leave this cancer island. I'm stuck. I can make the best of life here, but I don't get to leave.

My family and friends gathered around me, my therapist helped me navigate my feelings, my children's therapist helped them navigate their own and virtual support groups have provided me advice—medical, personal, mental, emotional.

Still, I needed more. Those of us who live with MBC need our own spaces. We need to be able to share openly and without fear of making others uncomfortable. While others with cancer may focus on what they'll do after treatment, we know that when we're done with treatment, that usually means we are exiting this life. That's what we need to discuss with our families.

I did find communities that truly reflect my situation. And when I did, a funny thing happened. I realized that I not only needed those communities but wanted to reach out and help others. Now, it's my time to start giving back. Since I know what community has done for me, I desire it for every other cancer patient, especially the young, the people of color and the late stagers like myself.

I got involved with For the Breast of Us, an organization that focuses on the needs of women of color affected by breast cancer. They are intentional about making space for those living with MBC. A new project I am excited to be a part of, Project Life MBC, is creating that space we so desperately need. It's a virtual wellness house just for us, focusing on our unique physical, emotional, financial, social and spiritual needs. I am mentoring those needing a hand to hold as they navigate their own diagnosis.

To me, it feels like building a cozy fire on this cancer island and inviting others to come connect and feel the warmth.