

The image shows the interior of a church. In the foreground, there are several rows of dark wooden pews with pointed tops. A red carpet runs down the right side of the pews. In the background, there are stained glass windows with colorful designs, including one with a figure in white. Three hanging lanterns with a gothic design are suspended from the ceiling. The walls are made of brick and have arched doorways. An exit sign is visible above a door on the right.

Sisters' Journey

Sharing a message of hope, support, and self-advocacy for women of color with breast cancer.



Eileen Williams-Esdaile

Carolyn Rogers,
Sisters' Journey member

A breast cancer diagnosis can be frightening for any woman. But due to significant and systemic health disparities, it can be an especially daunting prognosis for African American women who are 41 percent more likely than white women to die from the disease. Since 1999, the New Haven faith-based organization Sisters' Journey has strived to ensure that no woman of color should have to endure or experience the obstacles of a breast cancer diagnosis alone.

Through its annual survivors' calendar, Pink Tea fundraiser, monthly support meetings, and Mother Daughter Brunch, Sisters' Journey has spread the word about breast cancer awareness and early detection and shared messages of hope, support, and self-advocacy.

There Have to be Others Around Here
Sisters' Journey was founded by Linda White-Epps, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1991. "After my mom's

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diagnosis, my grandmother, Phyllis, rallied our whole family together to be with my mother, including my aunt, Natalie Wall,” Linda’s daughter, Dawn White-Bracey, now president of the board of directors of Sisters’ Journey, said.

When Ms. White-Epps asked her doctor about local support groups, her doctor referred her to a white woman in upstate New York. “My mom thought, ‘This is crazy; there have to be others around here,’” Ms. White-Bracey said. “She soon found that there were people close to her who were survivors themselves: her cousin, her mother-in-law, her Sunday school teacher, her godmother. These were people all around her but they just didn’t talk about it.”

Unfortunately, that also included her aunt, Ms. Wall. “When we found out years after my mother’s diagnosis that Aunt Natalie had late-stage breast cancer and was dying, my mother was devastated that she couldn’t reciprocate that same support because Natalie never talked about what she was going through herself.” Ms. White-Epps founded Sisters’ Journey, vowing that her life purpose would be to aid and support others facing the same battle.

Ms. White-Epps passed away in 2003, after a recurrence of her breast cancer. Her mother and daughter subsequently kept her mission alive and strong, along with an active board and community support.

Sisters’ Journey’s biggest outreach effort is its annual calendar, which includes instructions for breast self-exams and features a different breast cancer survivor each month. Among those featured in the first calendar in 2000 was Eileen

Williams-Esdaile, a family relative, who was first diagnosed at age 37. “From the very beginning of this challenge, I opted to let everyone I knew know what I was facing and asking them to pray with me and for me as well,” she wrote in her calendar entry.

An important event on the Sisters’ Journey calendar every year is the Pink Tea. The gathering—which drew in more than 550 people in 2022—is an annual celebration of survivorship and a launch party for the new edition of the survivors’ calendar, which will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2024. Many of the nearly 300 women featured over the years have been cared for at Smilow Cancer Hospital.

“The calendar is an exceptional tool,” explained Ms. Williams-Esdaile, now a two-time cancer survivor. “It’s not the doom and gloom stories you hear elsewhere. You see people who are still surviving and thriving, like myself,” she said. “It gives hope.”

Support and Self-Advocacy

To this day, Ms. Williams-Esdaile continues to share her story at every opportunity. As the Sisters’ Journey survivor coordinator, she is the reassuring voice greeting newly diagnosed cancer patients who reach out to Sisters’ Journey for support. She pairs them with a survivor with a similar diagnosis and invites them to the monthly support meetings. “Over the past 24 years, we have not missed a single month of meetings,” Ms. White-Bracey said proudly. When the monthly meetings shifted from in-person to Zoom format

during the pandemic, engagement increased and survivors joined remotely.

The meetings introduce newly-diagnosed women to survivors and enable all participants to share their journeys and resources. Occasional guest speakers have included Andrea Silber, MD, Professor of Clinical Medicine (Medical Oncology) at Smilow Cancer Hospital who encouraged participation in clinical trials. Smilow Cancer Hospital and Sisters’ Journey have long supported one another, dating back to when plans for Smilow were first shared with the community before its opening in 2009. More recently, Ms. Williams-Esdaile participated in Smilow’s Community Research Fellowship Program.

The Sisters’ Journey motto—be an advocate for your own body—particularly resonates at the organization’s annual Mother Daughter Brunch, which encourages attendees to understand how their family’s health history can impact their own treatment. “Knowing your family’s history can empower you to say to your doctors, ‘I have breast cancer in my family; should I be screened early?’” Ms. White-Bracey said.

Ms. White-Bracey and Ms. Williams-Esdaile continue to spread that message of empowerment and self-advocacy as they walk alongside Sisters’ Journey members on their cancer journeys. “There is such a need for this information; it’s so important,” Ms. White-Bracey explained. “How could we ever stop?”