

KPBS

Cosmetologist Tessie Bonner Saves Lives Through Breast Cancer Prevention

Black History Month 2014 Honoree

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By Monica Medina

Bonner encourages her clients to openly talk about breast checkups, mammograms and the myths that surround breast cancer.

Tessie Bonner considers herself a "church lady," given that her religious beliefs are at the core of who she is and how she lives her life. But Bonner, whose friends and close associates tend to also think of her as "the little engine that could," seems to be so much more than any one label.

Try compassionate, as in giving back to her community through her work as a cosmetologist. She works steadfastly to build awareness about breast cancer, urging black women to schedule their mammograms. In so doing, she's helped save countless lives.

She's also student and teacher: her craving to learn motivated her to become an educator, and pass her knowledge of cosmetology on to the next generation.

Then there's the latest label bestowed upon her—that of local hero.

KPBS and Union Bank are recognizing Bonner with the 2014 Black History Month Local Hero Award.

Since the early '90s, she has demonstrated a commitment to breast cancer prevention among African American women, for whom it is the second most common cause of cancer death.

"At the time, I was in my own salon when one of the ladies at my church introduced me to Dr. Georgia Sadler of UC San Diego," Bonner recalls. "Dr. Sadler had been trying to reach women through the church, but wasn't getting a good result. Knowing that the average black woman goes to the beauty salon at some time in her life, she started looking for beauty salons for black women that might be willing to participate in this program, which led to the start of Black Cosmetology Promoting Health."

Dr. Sadler, whose focus is reducing health disparities among diverse communities, couldn't have found a better advocate than Bonner, who uses the safety and comfort of the beauty salon to openly talk to her clients about breast checkups, mammograms and their myths.

"More black women die from this than women of other races," she states. "They say that by the time we find it, it's in the late stages and it's metastasized in our body, so I knew I needed to educate women that early detection saves lives."

As part of the program, a survey was conducted to gauge how many women were actually getting annual mammograms.

"We found that about half of the women at my salon weren't getting mammograms and had never received one," adds Bonner. "So we got other salons to participate to help reach more women."

Bonner, who was instrumental in making the San Diego pilot effort a success, soon caught national attention for her work. She appeared live on "Good Morning America," gave presentations at national meetings of cosmetologists and, more recently, author Malcolm Gladwell described the success of the program in his book, "The Tipping Point: How Small Things Make a Big Difference."

In 1994, Bonner got the biggest thrill of all, when Dr. Sadler helped arrange for her to lunch with President Bill Clinton at the University of California, San Diego graduation ceremonies.

She notes of the occasion, "I have never been so excited in my entire life—not even when I got married!"

As word spread, so did interest in what Bonner was doing.

"A lot of cosmetologists became interested and wanted to do the same thing," she says. "I was so happy that women were actually listening. After that, when I'd talk to women I'd hear, 'Oh yeah, I called my doctor. I got an appointment.' They were all excited that they were getting their mammograms."

Around this time, Bonner started taking classes at San Diego City College. Then, without realizing it, she gained enough credits to graduate—with honors. Yet, instead of graduating, she decided to enroll in school full time, majoring in Sociology and eventually joined City College's faculty, teaching cosmetology.

"When I'd introduce myself to my students, I'd say, 'I'm here to give you 110% of me and I want you to give that of yourself. Not for me, for yourself. I want you to be the best you can be and learn all you can learn.'"

To understand why education and fighting cancer are important to Bonner, one need look no further than her youth. Bonner grew up dirt poor on a farm just outside Shreveport, Louisiana. When she was only nine, she, along with her eight siblings, would spend five months of the year working in the fields, from sunrise to sunset.

"This was the South," she points out. "The white kids had nine months of school, the black kids only seven. We went to school October to May."

Despite this, her mother instilled in her a love of education.

"My mother was a self-educated woman," Bonner explains. "We never came home with a problem from school that our mother couldn't help us with. She always told me that knowledge is powerful. She was my inspiration."

In 1954, when Bonner entered 7th grade, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the Brown vs. Board of Education decision which called for an end to school segregation. The state of Louisiana resisted the decision, deciding instead to use the “separate but equal” approach. One of the changes made ensured that all schools were in session for nine months.

When Bonner reached 7th grade, Louisiana passed a law that allowed all children to attend school for nine months.

“Schools were still segregated,” observes Bonner. “We got the leftover books and the leftover everything. We were always behind.”

While still living in Louisiana, she enrolled in beauty school and an incident occurred that helped seal her path.

“When they talk about Rosa Parks, the same thing happened to me but I didn’t do what she did,” Bonner admits. “One day the beauty school let me out 30 minutes early. I lived across the bridge and had a babysitter because my husband worked nights. I’d ride the bus, which had designated seats for whites and for blacks. On this day, I get on the bus and I sit in the first seat designated for black people, but the bus was filling with white people. The bus driver asks me to move. I didn’t move because I was in the first seat available for blacks. Two young white boys got on the bus and the driver said, ‘I will not move this bus until you move.’ Of course he didn’t say it that nice, but I moved because I knew I had to get home to pick up my babies. Yet the two white boys didn’t even take the seat. It stayed empty. I guess they thought the driver was wrong for doing what he did and they proved it by not taking the seat, but I felt so humiliated. I finished beauty school because I made up my mind I wouldn’t be a housemaid for a white woman. I wanted to do something for myself and I knew I could always do hair.”

Eventually, Bonner and her husband moved to San Diego, but after 15 years together, their marriage ended in divorce. During this time, a good friend introduced her to Johnny Bonner, Jr.

“God was so good to me. I met the most wonderful man that any person could meet. When I met him I was going through divorce and I had five children. He was a loving man and we were married for 27 years. He passed away in 2006 of stomach cancer.”

This wasn’t the first time Bonner was deeply affected by cancer in her family.

“My oldest sister, Julia, died of kidney cancer when she was 51 years old,” Bonner recalls. “I was so saddened by that because she had neglected herself. She didn’t go to the doctor and when she went, it was too late.”

It was the memory of her sister that drove Bonner to want to help other black women.

“When I found out that there was something I could do to make women be aware of cancer, I took it,” explains Bonner. “I did this for my sister, Julia. I’m retired now but I still go to seminars and meetings, and teach at beauty salons when needed. Whenever I’m asked to do something, I never say no. For me, it’s always, what can I do next to help us?”

Dr. Sadler couldn't agree more. In her nomination of Bonner for the Local Hero Award, she wrote, "Tessie took a big risk working with me in our pilot program, although to her it seemed like the only sensible thing to do...Her clients trusted her to meet their aesthetic needs and they freely discussed with her issues related to their health and well-being. With her enthusiastic commitment to the project and willingness to encourage other stylists to join the campaign to promote mammography in the salons, Tessie is one bodacious lady...truly an unsung hero with the African American community."