Queen Latifah Explores Her Late Mother's Battle With Lung Disease

In a recent documentary, Latifah educates audiences about interstitial lung disease, the illness that took her mom's life.

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Before Queen Latifah's mother, Rita Owens, died of interstitial lung disease, she urged her daughter to make a film about her experience in order to help others. To honor Owens' wish, Latifah produced Beyond Breathless, which recently aired on A&E, People reports.

Owens died in 2018 from complications of scleroderma-related interstitial lung disease, a rare lung disease that causes lung scarring and impedes breathing. Owens was 65 years old and had lived with the disease for five years.

"My mom wanted to share her story," Latifah told People. "My mom wanted to help people."

The entertainer said that her mom, who was an educator, was a woman with a big heart who saw "everyone as someone," and that's why she wanted the documentary to be made. "She literally wanted to share her body with science so that no one else would have to experience the things that she had gone through," Latifah explained.

When she first noticed symptoms, Owens thought she was just tired and overworked. But then one day, she passed out during work at school and wound up in the hospital. At first, doctors believed Owens's health issues were heart-related. Ultimately, they traced the problem to her lungs and found scarring.

"It took us quite some time and a couple of different doctors to really get the diagnosis…And the scariest word that I think I ever heard was chronic," Latifah said. "Chronic means it's not going to end, it's going to continue."

She added that Owens, who, for most of her life was a vibrant and healthy woman, never smoked or drank and wasn't overweight. However, once the illness developed she could no longer breathe well and had difficulty getting around. Eventually, she was put on oxygen therapy indefinitely and assigned caregivers.

Latifah and her relatives worked together to take care of her mother and grew closer. "Our family

really just got tight and it's the more that you can have that kind of support the better it is," she said. "I learned to have a lot of compassion for anyone who's caring for someone who's not well in their family."

The film's takeaway? Latifah wants viewers to understand that early detection of interstitial lung disease can save lives. "That's what we want to do at the end of the day until there is a cure," she said.

She also hopes that caregivers take a moment to breathe because caring for loved ones, especially a parent, can be difficult.

Latifah wants people to remember Owens as a woman of faith who changed the lives of many people. "She's a very strong person and a beautiful person," she said. "I hope that that will be her legacy, as well as being so unselfish as to share her story with others."

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