Saying Goodbye to a Community Partner, Fierce Cancer Advocate and Friend

Bridgette Hempstead, founder of Cierra Sisters and staunch health equity research advocate, remembered as a force for underserved patients

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We've lost a lot of friends to cancer in the 10-plus years we've been writing Fred Hutch News, but this one hits hard.

Mentor, mother, activist, advocate, sister, survivor, researcher and friend, Bridgette Hempstead died in December of metastatic breast cancer; her celebration of life was held last month.

Hempstead wasn't just a patient; she was a force. A benevolent, persistent force who, from her very first encounter with the cancer care system, saw that it was broken — then went about fixing it. Through her research partnerships with scientists at Fred Hutch Cancer Center (and beyond) and her powerful voice, which she shared in countless stories, songs and speeches, Hempstead not only paved the way for policy change, she saved a whole lot of lives along the way.

She even saved her own life.

In 1996, she went to a doctor and requested a mammogram but was immediately turned down. There were a litany of reasons why she didn't qualify, but it was mainly that she was too young and too Black. Breast cancer didn't happen in the African American community, the provider told her. Come back in 10 years.

Hempstead insisted on a mammogram and a few days later, learned she had early-stage breast cancer. It was her 35th birthday.

Three days after that, still bandaged from the biopsy, she started Cierra Sisters, a support group for Black cancer patients and caregivers. Cierra was an African word for "knowing" and, as Hempstead put it herself, "if you have knowledge, you have the power to fight against the effects of breast cancer."

Bringing knowledge and power to her community

Bridgette recognized early on that Black people and other marginalized groups were not equitably represented in health care, particularly cancer care. And she sought to change that.

“There was nothing out there for my community,” she explained in this video. “No Black faces were celebrating survivorship. We were told it’s not going to happen to us. But African Americans are 20-40% more likely to die from breast cancer than others.”

She was “a Black woman with breast cancer out here wanting to make a difference.”

And she did.

Hempstead hosted World Cancer Day Awareness events and wellness fairs in her community where friends and neighbors could learn about cancer and other diseases from experts, get free cancer screenings and maybe even have their face painted. She sang the national anthem at Seattle Seahawks and Storm games and at Fred Hutch’s many Obliteride events. She shared her story on TV, on radio and video, in newspapers and on podcasts. She sat on numerous boards, and served as the vice president of the board of directors for the South Seattle Emerald. And her advocacy went beyond breast cancer.

“Bridgette was absolutely instrumental as a co-founder of ECANA, [the Endometrial Cancer Action Network for African-Americans], the groundbreaking SISTER Study, and she co-chaired our Executive Committee for the last four years,” said Fred Hutch/University of Washington oncologist and researcher Kemi Doll, MD. “Endometrial cancer research would not be where it is now without her.”

She was relentless in her mission to take down not just cancer, but bias.

For more than two decades, she partnered with Fred Hutch health disparities researchers, working with the Office of Community Outreach & Engagement (OCOE) as well as the health economics and financial toxicity folks at the Hutchinson Institution for Cancer Outcomes Research (HICOR) to make sure everybody in her community learned about cancer research and every cancer researcher she worked with learned about her community.

‘Bridgette Hempstead’s work with Cierra Sisters was amazing. She increased her community’s understanding of breast cancer and its effects on Black women, then organized her peers to spread that knowledge to the

wider Black community. Bridgette knew you needed to share knowledge … and participated not only in research, but also published and disseminated her research results. She worked hand-in-hand with researchers and community, demonstrating that communities have much to offer in advancing knowledge. Bridgette will be greatly missed, but her legacy lives on in the many individuals she instructed, mentored and charmed throughout her career.’
— Fred Hutch Professor Emeritus Dr. Beti Thompson

A leader in health equity

“Bridgette Hempstead was one of the most inspiring people I’ve ever met,” said HICOR Director Scott Ramsey, MD, PhD, who partnered with her on numerous studies, conferences and events. “She was a tireless advocate for Black cancer patients and family members and the passion, integrity and humanity that she brought every day to her foundation and everyone she interacted with made our community a better place.”

Health equity was crucial to Hempstead and her collaborations with Fred Hutch and the University of Washington as well as scientists at the Broad Institute in Boston, University of New Mexico and elsewhere helped launch a score of interventions designed to teach the public, particularly those most at risk, about cancer prevention, genetic testing and the importance of early detection, follow-up care and clinical research. Delayed diagnoses, she knew, could kill.

“Bridgette did not mince words when it came to difficult subjects, especially around health inequities and its root causes,” said OCOE Director Jay Mendoza, PhD, MD. “She understood this like few can, and worked tirelessly to make things better, like few have. Bridgette shined a light on the parts of our medical system that continue to fail underserved populations. And she did that to change and build our institutions because she believed that we can and will do better.”

She also gave much of herself — not just to Fred Hutch and Cierra Sisters — but to other nonprofits and organizations, as well as her vast community network, which stretched well beyond the Pacific Northwest. It was not unusual for Hempstead, who lived in south Seattle, to hop on a cross-country flight to help a newly diagnosed friend of a friend, someone she'd never met, get the care they needed.

But her advocacy efforts on behalf of underserved cancer patients weren't just local. Or national. They were international.

She traveled to Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia and other countries with oncologist and former Fred Hutch researcher Julie Gralow, MD, meeting with researchers, doctors, patients, even members of royal families, carrying her message of hope and health to thousands.

"Her participation demonstrated that patients could be partners in improving cancer care," said Gralow, now chief medical officer at the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), at Hempstead's celebration of life. "It also showed that you can lead an active and fulfilling life after a breast cancer diagnosis, even after a metastatic recurrence."

Hempstead's mere existence helped many understand that breast cancer, even metastatic disease, was not an immediate death sentence.

And her research collaborations — she published more than two dozen scientific papers — helped bridge knowledge gaps and create networks of trained community health educators. She used her cancer story — her pain and suffering as well as that of her community — as a springboard to create real change for others. And bring in funding for cancer research.

According to Gralow, Bridgette's help with just one research project — a right-sized dosing initiative — helped garner $11 million in research funding. And she was involved with dozens and dozens of these efforts.

She brought in donations, as well.

"Bridgette supported Fred Hutch, which inspired others to support Fred Hutch," said Kelly O'Brien, vice president of Philanthropy. "She used her beautiful voice to advocate for breast cancer patients, for cancer prevention, and for health equity. By sharing her experiences, she created community. I'm honored to be among those who benefited from her loving kindness."

> 'I feel privileged to have known and received mentorship from Bridgette Hempstead. Her fierce advocacy and determination to address the systemic

barriers to optimal health care touched the lives of many, including myself. Bridgette's perspective as a breast cancer survivor and her extensive research and advocacy experience was invaluable to our research study aimed at reducing delays in diagnosis among Ugandan women with breast cancer. Her tireless work contributed to a decrease in misconceptions, a reduction in obstacles to care, and it's helped strengthen trust between patients and providers.'
— Fred Hutch clinical and global health researcher Dr. Manoj P. Menon

Celebrating life, always

A firm believer in both science and God, a charmer with a smile that lit up every room — including the clinical exam room — Hempstead celebrated life at every turn. Even life with cancer.

Science and medicine needed to work for everybody, she would tell people. If Black people and other underserved communities aren't included in research studies, then the findings — the new therapies and cures — may not apply to them.

Hempstead was energetic, persistent, generous, kind, funny and fun. She never complained, not even when her cancer spread and she became a metastatic patient, in treatment for the rest of her life. Not even when it stole her powerful singing voice.

Listen to Hempstead sing 'Sista, Don't You Know?'

If anything, as her disease advanced, she grew more determined to create lasting change within the health care system. Thanks to her determination, resilience and willingness to push for equitable treatment, Bridgette was able to live with cancer for 28 years.

“Her passion and commitment for increased access to healthcare, cancer screening and cancer care for the Black/African American community was unwavering and infectious,” said OCOE’s Assistant Director Kathy Briant. “Bridgette made those she worked with feel like they had a responsibility to contribute to this important work, as well. We hope to partner with her family to continue to support the work she was so passionate about.”

One of Hempstead’s last projects was a series of videos highlighting the need for anti-racism in oncology, where patients too often succumb not because of their cancer, but because of bias and/or lack of insurance or access to care.

The videos premiered in December 2023 at a packed Fred Hutch event full of food, photos, stories, scientists and numerous cancer survivors. She loved a good party.

‘One person’ who changed many lives

HICOR project manager Shannon Kestner, who helped coordinate the premiere, said she was humbled by all that Hempstead had accomplished in her life.

“I remember being in that room listening to stories about racism in health care and people surviving despite of it, or experiencing losses because of it,” she said. “There weren’t just people impacted by cancer there, but leaders in cancer care delivery and oncologists, all listening and learning. I realized all of these people had come together because of one person, one undeniable force, who not only spoke out about her own experience, but demanded change and worked tirelessly for it.

“One person can change so many lives,” she said. “Bridgette proved that over and over again.”

And her legacy will continue, according to daughter Dee Scott, who referenced a February 8 Cierra Sisters World Cancer Day Celebration at Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute.

‘In her all-too-short life, Bridgette blazed a trail as a fierce advocate for cancer survivors, especially women of color with breast cancer. My last interaction with her was an intense effort to confront the problem of racism in oncology in a video series. We are all in a far better place because of her energy and commitment and owe

it to her to take her passion forward.’

— Fred Hutch Executive Vice President of Clinical Affairs Dr. Nancy Davidson, holder of the Raisbeck Endowed Chair for Collaborative Research

Tomorrow is not promised to anyone, Hempstead used to say.

“But are you here today?” she’d ask. “Then think about this: Today was the tomorrow that wasn’t promised. Live your life to the fullest and leave with a bang.”

Bridgette Hempstead left us on December 12, not only with a bang, but with countless irons in countless fires. Here’s to keeping them lit.

Rest in power and peace, dear friend.

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