Cancer Health 25: Eileen Z. Fuentes

A cancer survivor turned health justice activist who helps other people with cancer navigate the confusing medical system

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The Cancer Health 25 is an annual list that honors individuals who have made a difference in the lives of people with cancer. This year's theme is quality of life. To see the full list, click here.

Eileen Z. Fuentes's reaction when she learned she had breast cancer was, "What the hell?!" She was 34, and there was no history of cancer in her family. She was juggling a full-time job, school, her marriage and three daughters. Her life was full.

Fuentes, now 48, had Stage II triple-negative breast cancer, which required aggressive treatment. For her, that included chemotherapy as well as surgery to remove both breasts and then reconstruct them. She developed a blood clot in her heart that required twice-daily injections in her stomach. She endured months of hardship, struggle and pain, but, she writes, she was determined to take a negative and turn it into a positive.

That positive became a journey to self-care and empowerment. She learned about nutrition and complementary techniques that embraced a spiritual outlook. She got certified as a holistic health

coach and a patient navigator as well as an M.A. in health education. Then, she began teaching what she'd learned to others. As the patient navigator at Columbia University Medical Center's Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center in New York City, she led a bilingual wellness program.

As a Latina patient navigator, Fuentes was able to translate medical terms into everyday English or Spanish for others. She figured out the logistics and put together the team that patients needed to navigate their illness and recovery. Now, Fuentes manages the department of patient relations at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, also in New York City, and serves as a patient advocate for various organizations, including the National Cancer Institute.

Throughout her career as community health educator and health justice advocate, Fuentes has focused particular attention on Latina and Black women, who are often left out of conversations about health and wellness and whose rates of breast cancer survival are lower than white women's. Her goal, she explained to a journalist, is to help get every cancer patient from illness to wellness and help them work with ancestral healing modalities and their doctors to heal themselves.

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