STRENGTH IN UNION
Actor Gabrielle Union urges women not to put off breast-cancer screenings
PG. 54
YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND

Inspired by the loss of a close pal, Gabrielle Union is on a mission to empower women to get cancer screenings

By Kara Mayer Robinson

WHEN LIFE DELIVERS A BLOW, actor Gabrielle Union doesn't sit around and stew. Instead she takes action. Case in point: In 2005, she discovered that her close friend Kristen Martinez, then 31, had stage 4 metastatic breast cancer. Without skipping a beat, Union rallied behind Martinez and her family to arrange treatment that could boost Martinez's chances of survival.

"We were all like, 'We're going to get her cured,'" says Union. "Let's go to Mexico or let's go to Europe—whoever was doing cutting-edge work. As long as we could find the funds, let's do it."

Because it was late-stage cancer, Martinez didn't have a minute to waste. She thought her odds would be best with progressive treatment and clinical trials. But because they were considered experimental, her insurance didn't cover them. So Union plunged into grassroots fundraising. She hosted casino nights and auctioned off high-ticket items to help her friend pay for the care she wanted.

Photography by Jeff Lipsky
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After Martinez completed a clinical trial, things began to look up, and then suddenly the cancer seemed to be gone. "It looked like a miracle happened. Her hair was growing back. She was gaining her weight back. She looked amazing. It was like she was cured," Union says.

But instead, less than a year later, the cancer was anything but gone. In 2010, five years after her diagnosis, Kristen Martinez died.

"It had never occurred to me that she was not going to beat it," says Union, 43, who stars in the BET television series Being Mary Jane and has appeared in movies like Top Five and Bring It On. "I guess nobody Googled what metastatic means. We didn't realize that the prognosis is sort of built into the diagnosis."

DO EARLIER DIAGNOSES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?
Metastatic cancer is cancer that has spread to other parts of the body. While some treatments can help some women with metastatic breast cancer live longer, the disease is not curable, says Katherine Crew, MD, an oncologist at New York-Presbyterian/Columbia Medical Center. By the time Martinez received her diagnosis, cancer cells had traveled from her breast to her bones.

Would the outcome be different if Martinez had discovered her cancer sooner? Maybe. "The earlier breast cancer is detected, the greater the likelihood of cure," says Crew. When caught early, it typically hasn't spread.

Many doctors believe tests that detect breast cancer, like mammograms, can save thousands of lives every year. But there's controversy about what the guidelines should be.

The American Cancer Society recommends yearly mammograms beginning at age 45—and for women at high risk, an annual mammogram along with MRI. But not everyone agrees. "There is no consensus about whether screening average-risk women ages 40 to 49 years is beneficial," says Crew.

Some doctors advise breast self-exams, but many do not. Some organizations, such as the American Cancer Society, don't recommend them, citing lack of evidence that they are effective.

"It's important to recognize symptoms, such as breast lumps," says Crew, noting that is especially true for young women who don't get regular screenings. Other symptoms include breast pain, nipple pain, swelling, skin irritation, redness, nipple retraction, and nipple discharge. Many experts urge women to know their bodies and if something doesn't feel right, talk to a doctor.

Sadly, Martinez had symptoms—pain in her side and back—but put off seeing a doctor. With a recent work promotion, new apartment, and budding relationship, her life was on overdrive. "Everything was more important than these little nagging aches and pains," Union recalls. By the time Martinez saw a doctor, her cancer was already in a late stage.

Cindy Fletcher, who runs an outreach program to Latinas for the breast cancer foundation Susan G. Komen, says this is common. "Women are so concerned about everyone else in their lives, they don't take the time to care about themselves," she says. She adds that in communities she works with, women often face a host of barriers to care, like language and cultural differences.
“I get mammograms once a year. I started getting them in my 30s, due to Kristen. Yes, it’s uncomfortable. But it can literally save your life.”

insurance gaps, limited access, and misinformation. “Their screening rate is less. So they may be detecting it later,” she says.

Unfortunately, late detection can be particularly devastating to women like Martinez, who was young and Latina. “On average, younger women tend to have more aggressive breast cancers,” says Crew. When Latina women are diagnosed with breast cancer, they tend to have more advanced-stage tumors. While African-American women tend to have lower breast cancer rates than Caucasians, they’re more likely to die from the disease.

Several organizations are pushing to get the word out to groups at particular risk. Komen funds over 530 programs to educate, screen, diagnose, and treat the Latina community. Young Survival Coalition recently created a diversity strategy to promote outreach to the Latina, African-American, and LGBT communities.

Union joined the cause early on. In 2008, she became a Global Ambassador for Komen, leveraging her celebrity to raise awareness about breast cancer and encourage others to join the cause. She appeared in public service announcements to educate and urge women to get screenings. The same year, she joined Komen to open Ghana’s first breast health hospital.

After losing Martinez, Union continued full steam ahead. In 2010, she formed “Gabby’s Circle of Promise,” a Race for the Cure team in her friend’s honor. And in 2012, she became a spokesperson for Planned Parenthood, launching an initiative to encourage more women to get screened for breast cancer.

FAMILY AFFAIR

Today Union continues to advocate for women’s health. She works with Planned Parenthood to promote affordable wellness programs and runs Komen’s Race for the Cure whenever possible. Her cause work is more challenging now because her schedule is packed solid. She’s filming the fourth season of Being Mary Jane and has three movies coming out: The Birth of a Nation, Almost Christmas, and Sleepless. She is also launching a line of watches for Invicta and has her own wine label, Vanilla Puddin.

When she’s not working, she’s in full-on family mode.

GABRIELLE’S HEALTHY LIVING TIPS

1. Try Pilates
   “I started doing Pilates for Bad Boys 2 and I just loved how my body transformed. I zone out, find that little bit of peace for an hour, then go back to my crazy life.”

2. Drink water
   “I drink a gallon of water a day. It’s actually not as hard as it sounds. Yes, you’re going to the bathroom all the time, but it is the best thing.”
In 2014, she married professional basketball player Dwyane Wade. So far, she says, things are going smashingly. “He’s my best friend—at least right now. Talk to me in a few years,” she says with a laugh.

Not only is Union a new wife, she’s also a new mom. When she and Wade tied the knot, she became a stepmom to his sons Zaire, 14, and Zion, 9, and his nephew Dahveon, 15. “I lucked out. They’re loving kids that are appreciative of my consistency,” she says. “Being a stepparent is probably one of the more thankless jobs. It’s hard to figure out: How much do I do? When do I pull back? It’s a very challenging tap dance.”

With Wade’s recent transfer to the Chicago Bulls, the entire brood is in the midst of a major transition—relocating from Miami to the Midwest. Union says it’s particularly daunting for Zaire and Dahveon, who just entered high school. But she says they’re up for it—and she’ll be there to ease them over the bumps.

### A LASTING LEGACY

While Union is committed to her family and career, she stops short of neglecting herself. “I set boundaries,” she says. “I want to make sure I’m as healthy as possible.”

To stay fit, Union works out with a personal trainer. A favorite calorie-crusher is a basketball-themed workout that taps her competitive spirit—perfect for the athletic Union, who played basketball and soccer and ran track in high school.

She visits her doctor regularly and checks on anything that doesn’t feel right. “Some could say I’m a hypochondriac,” she says. “I investigate everything—any aches, pains, creaks. I’ll go see doctors and specialists. I’m like, If I’m paying for this insurance, I’m going to use it—all of it.”

Her breast health is no exception. “I get mammograms once a year. I started getting them in my 30s, due to Kristen. I just wanted to stay on top of it. Yes, it’s uncomfortable. Yes, it’s a little weird. But it can literally save your life,” she says. If there’s one lesson Union learned from her friend, it’s that no matter how busy her life gets, no matter how difficult it can be to carve out time, neglecting her health simply is not an option. “I prioritize my own health,” Union says. “I have to make sure my health is great—so I’m around to help my family.”

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**Banish sugary drinks**

“Coffee drinks? They’re like a whole day’s worth of calories. Some of us need that jolt of caffeine, but we can get it with an espresso or black coffee.”

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Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD, WebMD Lead Medical Editor