A CONVERSATION ABOUT BREAST CANCER ADOVACY WITH DR. KRISTEN ABATSIS MCHENRY

By: Abiana Adamson & Naija Brown

McHenry: My aunt is a breast cancer survivor and during graduate school my entire family participated in a sort of family reunion in the Susan G. Komen For the Cure Walk. Each year we would go to offer our financial and emotional support to my aunt.

One year at the walk, I started to think about why I was there? What I was accomplishing? Then I started digging a little deeper into really how much I was donating. I began to realize that I was donating very little but spending a lot.

So these questions then arose for me – Where does all this money go for breast cancer research? What is it actually for? What do organizations like the Komen Foundation actually do?

On top of that, I noticed that these walks felt very powerful. We were all together wearing pink and having this energy of support focusing on life and survival. Then immediately after the walk would finish, we would walk through the balloon finish line. There we would be handed freebies: Yoplait yogurts, Nutrigrain bars, frisbees, visors, and you could sit in a Ford Mustang.

As a social scientist, I was curious about this change, where all of a sudden this walk becomes a moment of marketing. You shift so quickly from feeling like an activist, or an advocate at the very least, to a potential consumer.

I wanted to ask those questions, so that really motivated me to start my dissertation on breast cancer politics, which ultimately lead to my book!

Brown: It is amazing how asking the right questions can grow into an entire research project!

I am interested in public health and hope to conduct research concerning health disparities.

Do you think that the often-individual centered focus of the pink movement to end breast cancer prevents scientists and policy makers from asking the right questions?

McHenry: Great question! Communities of color, and specifically poor communities of color are much more likely to live in environments that are toxic and are more likely to live near a landfill. Sometimes the drinking water is more likely to be polluted. White women and black women get mammograms at about the
same rate. Yet black women are much more likely to die from breast cancer. So there are issues of structural racism there, which messages about early detection are not necessarily going to solve.

Now, the Black Women’s Health Imperative is focusing right now on the conversation about when to get a mammogram and how that will impact mortality rates for black women. I think that is something to watch and pay close attention to if you are interested in this issue.

Brown: I’ll have to look into this. What are ways Spelman students or the college can pivot away from consumer activism?

McHenry: That is a great question. Certainly we just had October or what I would call, ‘Pinktober’, which was very evident here at Spelman. I saw pink ribbons everywhere. There was a walk on campus, there were tables, and I know students who participated.

I asked them, why did you walk?
- Students responded “I don’t know.”

I asked again saying there must be some reason.
- They said “To support women with breast cancer.”

Wanting more from them I asked, well what did you walk for? Did you raise any money?
- Students responded “Well, I don’t know.”

Lastly I asked, do you have any idea where that money went?
- “No, maybe the Komen Foundation.”

I would encourage Spelman students to question the type of activism they are doing. Do not walk for the sake of walking or the symbolic gesture. Follow that money, find out where it is going, and then check to see if the organization focuses on strategies preventing breast cancer.

I would also challenge Spelman students to start thinking about what motivates them to buy products with pink ribbons and investigate where that money is going? So if you are buying Reebok products with pink ribbons, food, or even something in the bookstore—dig a little deeper.

I also encourage Spelman students, especially the ones that take my classes, to investigate the personal care products they are using and find out what chemicals are in them. Are these chemicals cancer causing or linked to causing cancer? Using the Skindeep Database is a good step for checking the toxicity of your personal care products.

Brown: I actually went and did that! I saw that what usually raised the toxicity rating was the “fragrance” ingredient, which was often unknown.

McHenry: Fragrance is a catch-all that companies use to claim that the ingredients are “trade secrets”, so they don’t want us to know. What’s problematic is that those unnamed chemicals are sometimes the most toxic. I would encourage you to go home and throw out your products that have fragrance as an ingredient. The legislation right now does not allow us to ban unhealthy chemicals, or to even test to know which chemicals are problematic. We really need better legislation, so that we are not just randomly testing our bodies to see what is or isn’t dangerous, because that’s unacceptable.

Brown: Can you elaborate on the role of government at all levels in the cancer industrial complex?

McHenry: I think that breast cancer is a politically sexy issue – in the sense that Republicans and Democrats can often get on board and say they support breast cancer with no cost to them. At the federal level, I would like to see a clearer focus on prevention and more of our budgets going towards researching environmental causes of cancer. I want to see follow up from the President’s Cancer Panel, which admitted that we don’t yet know the true extent of environmental links to cancer.

At the state level, California is a good model. California has done some important work in getting legislation that better protects its citizens – such as stores having disclaimers on products warning of possible links to cancer and more regulations on companies. I want to see better regulation of chemicals and use of precautionary principles at the state and federal levels.

References