

Fighting Back

Woman's grief inspires
breast-cancer campaign

By Robin Farmer



Geraldine Harris hands out informational pamphlets about triple-negative breast cancer in honor of her sister Francene Robinson, shown with her below.

A sister's death from triple-negative breast cancer energized Geraldine Harris to inform others about this aggressive, hard-to-treat form of the disease that disproportionately affects African-American women.

Harris does her part — one brochure at a time. The Chesterfield County resident has helped to distribute nearly 8,000 brochures about this type of breast cancer at area hospitals, churches and sororities, as well as grocery stores and to passersby on the street.

Doing so honors her sister, Francene Robinson, whose battle with this form of cancer ended on June 5, 2009. Robinson, 58, was the youngest of 10 siblings. "I wanted her name to be remembered with triple-negative breast cancer," says Harris.

The 50-page brochure from the Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation is also available online. It provides detailed information about a disease many people have not heard about. More prevalent in women younger than 50,



this kind of cancer lacks three receptors known to fuel most breast cancers: estrogen receptors, progesterone receptors and human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2).

As a result, triple-negative breast cancer doesn't respond to medication targeted at those receptors, so chemotherapy is the only systemic treatment available, says Dr. Mary Helen

Hackney of VCU Massey Cancer Center.

"The problem with chemotherapy is it takes a toll on the body," she says.

Statistics show that black women are twice as likely as white women to get triple-negative breast cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that 207,090 new cases of invasive breast cancer will be diagnosed among American women this year. Triple-

negative breast cancer represents approximately 15 percent of U.S. breast-cancer cases.

Information can save lives, Harris says, adding that by spreading word about the disease, she pays tribute to her sister's values: "She was always wanting to help others."