



Fighting Pretty

PROVIDING STRENGTH & BEAUTY TO WOMEN BATTLING BREAST CANCER

By Kendra Y. Mims-Applewhite

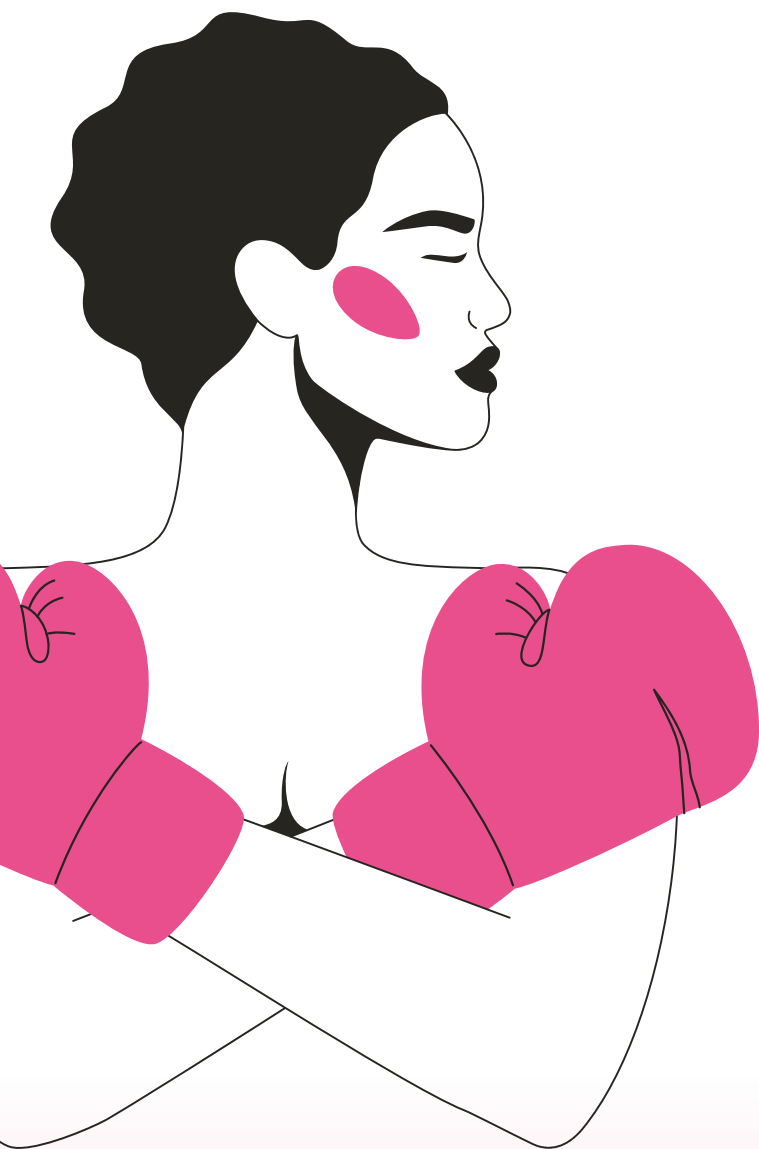
“How do you look so good?”

Kara Frazier was often asked about her radiant appearance during her chemotherapy sessions.

Determined not to let her stage 3 breast cancer diagnosis dampen her confidence and spirit at 26 years old, she rocked her bright head scarves after losing her hair and wore hot pink lipstick throughout treatment. She says a pair of mini pink boxing gloves from a family friend helped her tap into her inner strength.

“The pink lipstick was the one thing that brightened up my face with my scarf,” she says, noting she also showed up to treatment in stylish attire instead of loungewear to make herself feel better. “But even more than the lipstick and clothes, the boxing gloves inspired me to stay strong and made me want to try and feel beautiful.”

Three years after her treatment ended, Kara felt a pull to do something based on her experience as a young breast cancer survivor. Her vision became clear when she sent a care package to another woman facing a breast cancer diagnosis. The box included pink lipstick and the boxing gloves she received as a gift. The impact of that message spurred Kara to create an organization that shipped care packages to remind women of their strength and beauty while fighting the disease.





"I have a supportive family that instilled that confidence in me, but not everyone has that support system," Kara says. "I thought maybe I could do that for people."

Kara launched her nonprofit organization, Fighting Pretty, in 2013. Within the first year, she shipped 500 "Pretty Packages" from her home in New York, and her reach doubled when she relocated to Portland, Ore., the following year. To date, Fighting Pretty has reached more than 15,000 women in all 50 states and 17 countries.

"Our biggest achievement is that we continue to grow and help more women every year, even through COVID," she says. "We are nimble enough to inspire and support women, regardless of their stage or whether they've just been diagnosed, still in active treatment, just got out of surgery or they're 10 years out of cancer treatment. We are relevant to anyone who has ever experienced cancer and could use a reminder of their strength and beauty."

The inspiration behind the organization stemmed from a conversation Kara had with a woman in her support group who conceded she slept in her wig. After listening to her fears about taking off her wig in front of her husband, Kara reminded the woman she was still beautiful without hair and taught her how to wrap a head scarf. She says the encounter shed light on some of the challenges women battling breast cancer were facing.

"Her husband never saw her without her wig, and she was terrified, but she felt like a million bucks after we wrapped her head scarf," Kara says. "That woman made me think this was an opportunity to inspire and empower these women to own it. It made me realize women are losing a sense of themselves because

they don't have the inner confidence. I want to help remind women they are not 'cancer patients.' They are still themselves and still beautiful, sexy, amazing women whether they have hair, eyelashes, breasts, ovaries or not."

Through Fighting Pretty, family members, friends and caregivers can support women battling breast cancer through several initiatives. The Pretty Package program lets supporters send customized packages with inspirational items (such as apparel, mini boxing gloves, a wine set, earrings and more), with the proceeds from all shop items going right back into the nonprofit to support the mission.

"Everything in the shop is designed to empower women and remind them that they are fierce," Kara says. "Once they get that Pretty Package, they can join our network and communicate with other women just like them."

Strength and beauty

Kara and her team launched the Strength and Beauty program during COVID-19. When the pandemic halted volunteer events and prevented the organization from prepackaging orders with volunteers, they shifted gears and partnered with cancer centers, hospitals, support groups and plastic surgeons throughout the United States and Canada to provide Strength and Beauty kits – a miniature version of the Pretty Package – to women battling cancer in active treatment.

"With COVID, these women were going through cancer alone, so it was even harder to feel supported, inspired and



beautiful,” Kara notes. “But our focus is crystal clear now more than ever because of the Strength and Beauty program. We started reaching out to cancer clinics and plastic surgeons and offering to partner with them so that patients wouldn’t feel alone coming out of surgery and through their treatment. The program took off.”

The Strength and Beauty kits come with a pair of Fighting Pretty mini boxing gloves, an inspirational card and lipstick donated through Thrive Causemetics, a clean beauty brand. Despite the pandemic’s unprecedented disruption, Fighting Pretty shipped more than 3,000 Strength and Beauty kits during COVID-19 and is on target to send 5,000 kits to hospitals and plastic surgeons this year.

“We work directly with plastic surgeons, and we get amazing feedback that these kits really do help their breast reconstruction patients,” Kara says. “Your body changes after reconstructive surgery, whether it’s an implant or explant, and it’s such an emotional process. The surgeons say they are so thankful for having a kit they can provide to their patients because it makes their relationship closer and reminds patients that they are beautiful. We are helping so many women in active treatment now and getting the word out to providers that we have this resource.”

ASPS member Juliana Hansen, MD, experienced the impact of Fighting Pretty firsthand during her battle with breast cancer when their paths crossed at OHSU Knight Cancer Institute five years ago.



The women in this photo are three of five recipients of the original pink boxing gloves.



Kara packs and ships Pretty Packages from her mother’s home in 2013.



“We met to discuss my role in breast reconstructive surgery and the overlap with hers as the marketing manager for OHSU, but she immediately recognized the head scarf I was wearing to cover my bald chemo head,” Dr. Hansen recalls. “Our meeting’s topic took a different turn as we traded cancer stories, and I learned of her own diagnosis at 26. While my response to breast cancer was to just keep on with daily life, Kara’s response was to start helping and inspiring others.”

After their meeting Kara hand-delivered a Pretty Package to Dr. Hansen with her signature mini pink boxing gloves, lipstick and other comforting items, including a copy of her own story for inspiration and guidance. Dr. Hansen, who serves on Fighting Pretty’s board, says the organization helps women smile through their adversity and delivers hope to her reconstruction patients.

“I have watched patient after patient of mine light up when receiving their own Fighting Pretty gift and the powerful knowledge that they are being provided a supportive network of strength and love,” Dr. Hansen says. “Kara is a force of exquisite beauty and profound strength.”

Making an impact

In 2018, Kara made an appearance on the “Today Show” to discuss her organization – a defining and proud moment for Fighting Pretty, she says. They received 2,000 Pretty Package orders on that day alone.

“It wasn’t just about being on TV, but it was more about sharing our message with anyone watching and having 100 volunteers behind me,” Kara says. “My family, friends and supporters flew in from around the country to help us make 400 Pretty Packages on the show that morning, which we handed off to cancer patients in local hospitals. It was the perfect representation of what Fighting Pretty does. It brings together a community of people who care about helping women to feel strong and beautiful through cancer.”

Kara says the moment was much bigger than her personal story.

“It enabled us to have a megaphone to inspire women and help families and friends of cancer patients know they could do something,” she says. “It was such a proud moment because it wasn’t just about Kara who had cancer at 26. Now there are 15,000 women out there who consider themselves to be ‘Fighting Pretty.’ That’s a small number in comparison to the number of women battling cancer, so we have a lot of work to do. But inch by inch, mile by mile, we are making an impact.”

In addition to running Fighting Pretty with volunteer staff, Kara is a full-time marketing manager at OHSU Knight Cancer Institute. She says following her passion to launch Fighting Pretty has changed her life and afforded her unique and exciting opportunities, such as ringing the New York Stock Exchange Closing Bell, appearing on the “Today Show,” walking in the AnaOno/Cancerland fashion show at New York Fashion Week

and participating in the Gap Body and Ulta Beauty breast cancer awareness campaigns.

"I could have never imagined this in my life," Kara says. "Professionally, I have never had a job that has taught me as much as Fighting Pretty. On a personal level, it has made me much more confident about the woman I am."

Still Fighting Pretty

In 2020, Kara decided to have her breast implants removed for personal reasons following a device withdrawal a decade after her breast reconstruction procedure. Although she felt great physically as a 10-year cancer survivor, she says her explant surgery and new body reawakened her past trauma. The Fighting Pretty boxing gloves provided her strength as she planned her wedding.

"The idea of Fighting Pretty was reinvigorated for me personally last year when all this PTSD from my cancer battle came flooding back because of the surgery," says Kara, who recently tied the knot. "I was trying to 'Fight Pretty' while searching for a wedding dress and swimsuits for my honeymoon without any breasts, and I was doing it as a healthy woman who had beaten cancer. Healthy women 10 years out of treatment may be Fighting Pretty for as long as they live because they are still looking at their scars and going through emotional challenges that were brought on by the disease. These little gloves remind women to keep Fighting Pretty and stay strong even when they are cancer free."

Kara is moved to tears when she considers what Fighting Pretty means to her at this stage in her life.

"I have a new flat chest that looks scary in comparison to when I had implants, and it's extremely emotional," she says through tears. "If you continue to remind yourself that you're strong and beautiful, and you have a healthy body, even if it doesn't look like everyone else, you're Fighting Pretty, and that is something to be proud of."

ASPS member Alison Nauta, MD, of OHSU Knight Cancer Institute, worked with Kara on several projects at OHSU and attended her Fighting Pretty events before she performed her explant surgery last year. She says she admires Kara's infectious positivity and drive to help women in their darkest hour.

"Kara's journey through cancer has not only given her a new lease on life but has enabled her to inspire others to do the same," Dr. Nauta says. "She has taken an event that happened to her when she was young and turned it into a positive by giving women something that makes them feel confident and maintain a sense of self. Through her personal connections with patients and providers in Portland, she's been able to help them as they go through their journey."

Dr. Nauta and Kara note their relationship has evolved from colleagues to physician-patient to friends. Kara credits both Dr. Nauta and ASPS member Peter Cordeiro, MD, who performed her



Fighting Pretty Story: **Rowena Bergman,** New Jersey

I was diagnosed with DCIS (pre-invasive breast cancer) in 2016 after a routine mammogram. I decided to undergo a bilateral mastectomy and breast reconstruction. My friend sent me a Fighting Pretty package around surgery time. There were these cute, pink boxing gloves inside the box. I hung them up in the rearview mirror in my car. I occasionally joined group fitness classes and always liked boxing, but I never got into it. After healing from my reconstruction, I looked at those gloves and told myself I needed to get in tip-top shape. Coincidentally, I started boxing after my recovery and have been doing it for five years now. My first pair of boxing gloves were pink because of Fighting Pretty. Throughout the last five years, the road to recovery has had a lot of ups and downs but boxing was the one thing that kept me strong physically and mentally.

Kara's organization is so inspiring and empowering. Cancer is a scary thing. Her boxing gloves symbolize fighting through it. The peer-to-peer-inspiration is phenomenal and powerful for survivors and women going through it. My motto now is: I'm going to fight like a boxer.

Breast reconstruction is an extremely personal choice, but for me, it was a no-brainer. My decision had a lot to do with my plastic surgeon. His bedside manner was amazing, and I loved him immediately. He was so comforting and explained everything to me so well. I knew I was in good hands.

I didn't think about breast reconstruction as a big piece of it at first, but the procedure was like a silver lining for me. The size of my chest hindered a lot of things. I've always been top heavy, so I avoided going to the gym. Breast reconstruction was necessary for me to carry on with life. Now I can work out, take up boxing and move around easier than I could before. I can enjoy the life I wanted, remain active and run around with my kids or go to the pool with them. Breast reconstruction has improved my quality of life.

You have to count your blessings.

Fighting Pretty Story:

Paula Flory

New Jersey

In 2011, I was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer after finding a lump in my armpit. I was 45 and in the best shape of my life. I chose implant-based reconstruction following a mastectomy.

I discovered Fighting Pretty long after my initial diagnosis while working as a director of a breast cancer organization in New Jersey. We received Fighting Pretty packages to distribute to breast cancer patients. I was on a quest to find the simplest way to feel whole and restore myself to feel good in my own skin. In the midst of my journey, I received this beautiful pink box. It was a little box of hope. Fighting Pretty validated that many of us on this journey are faced with the prospect of dying but also the reality of knowing our body will never be the same. There is this whole community and world of women facing breast cancer who feel like something is taken away from us that won't come back. I've met many women who feel superficial about missing their breasts, but I tell them it is a big deal. It's an amputation. For many of us, it's part of who we are. It's okay to mourn the loss of your breasts and the way they were before cancer. It's OK to continue to fight to be pretty.

I was not alone in my quest to feel beautiful again. What Fighting Pretty is doing with their boxes resonates so deeply with some of us. Receiving the box, opening the box, using the products and hanging on to those pink boxing gloves is an entire experience. It inspires hope in a big way. I was into boxing before cancer, and I continued boxing with pink gloves to remind myself to keep fighting. When I received the mini pink



gloves in the box, I knew it was a sign to keep moving forward.

I had a long and complicated reconstruction journey, including nine revisions. Six years after my initial procedure, my plastic surgeon recommended I undergo latissimus dorsi flap reconstruction surgery, and that improved my quality of life tremendously. I had a desire to remain athletic and exercise, and the recovery was a complete 180.

I had challenges, but my life is so much richer because of all of it. I found a plastic surgeon who encouraged me through my journey. I appreciate plastic surgeons who combine their artistry and compassion and dedicate themselves to helping us feel whole again.

My feminine form is so important to me. The reconstruction aspect is just as important as the oncology piece. Many of us would feel dead inside without having a compassionate plastic surgeon by our side to tell us, 'We are going to help you feel like the woman you are.' It's really the most important piece for some of us. Yes, we survived, but now we don't have to be ashamed when we take off our tops. Yes, we have these scars, but they have meaning. I fought for my life and these scars are a roadmap of that fight. But I have a plastic surgeon by my side who made me feel beautiful not in spite of, but because of what I went through.

breast reconstruction procedure, for helping her through her reconstruction journey.

"Dr. Corderio did such an amazing job with my breast reconstruction, and I was happy with the outcome for many years," Kara adds. "Dr. Nauta became a surgeon and a sister after my explant surgery. They are both caring, professional and amazing."

What pretty means to you

Although the idea started with hot pink lipstick, Kara wants people to know Fighting Pretty is more than a beauty product. The Fighting Pretty mentality empowers women to define beauty on their own terms. Fighting Pretty means different things to different people, Kara adds.

"Whether you put henna all over your head and hands because that makes you feel powerful, or you lay around in your sweats to watch your favorite movie because you don't want to think about cancer today, you're Fighting Pretty," she says. "Or you could be the woman who wears big earrings, hot pink lipstick and high heels. Fighting Pretty means something different to everybody because it's a feeling that says, 'I want to pick myself up and feel good today and face whatever is coming my way.' That's what our mission is all about."

Kara wants Fighting Pretty to become a household name in the future. Her goal is to continue expanding its reach and get Pretty Packages and Strength and Beauty kits into every woman's hand who needs them. With more funding, she could make her dream a reality.

"When a woman hears she has breast cancer, or any type of cancer, I hope she encounters us at some point in her journey and feels like, 'I got this, and I can take on this challenge because I know I am strong enough and beautiful no matter what,'" Kara says. "I hope people can use the Fighting Pretty name to describe themselves and they can embrace whatever comes their way and 'Fight Pretty' through it all." 