

Ni hao!

First, I'd like to thank the organizers of the Global Summit of Women for inviting me to be here today. It's an honor to be speaking among such accomplished women. Congratulations on your 20th anniversary.

If you'd have told me this month, May, in 2005 that I'd be speaking to such a group of distinguished women in Beijing, China, I probably wouldn't have believed you. I was 28 at the time, living in New York City, and had just started working at a magazine for young women.

If you had told me that it was because my best friend of 12 years, Heather, would die of cervical cancer by that December 2005, I *definitely* wouldn't have believed you.

But that is why I'm here. So let me tell you about Heather, and what she went through—and what we *all* can learn from it: That no other woman on this planet—from New York to Beijing, and everywhere in between—needs to die from cervical cancer, a *completely* preventable form of cancer.

Now, about Heather.

She and I met as high school freshman in our hometown on the coast of Florida. We were 14 years old and became instant friends. We looked alike, and people mistook us for sisters. We were happy to play along.

We had classes together, played soccer together, and hung out together outside of school as often as possible. We loved the beach, music, boys.

What made me love Heather so much was that she was such an optimist, so upbeat. She was a ray of sunshine.

When it was time to go off to college, four years later, we went to different universities in Florida.

But we'd do road trips—driving hours—to see one another. Even if it had been months since we'd hung out, we always picked up right where we left off. After school I moved to New York to pursue a career in the magazine industry; Heather stayed in Florida, working as a lab technician at a hospital.

Fast forward several years later to 2004.

Heather calls to tell me she's moving to New York, too.

No, she doesn't have a job.

But she has a dream of someday opening up a holistic spa, and she wants to enroll in classes in the city—to learn traditional Chinese medicine, Swedish massage, you name it.

So she moved to New York. And until she could make her dream a reality, she worked two or three jobs at a time as a waitress or a bartender.

I think this is a pretty revealing fact about Heather: She got a tattoo on the back of her neck [touch back of neck] that was the Chinese symbol for “PERSEVERANCE.” Nothing could have been more fitting.

Heather was working two jobs and taking classes, when she called me in May 2005 and asked me to meet up with her after work. She had something important to tell me. I could tell by the tone of her voice, that the news wasn't going to be good.

But I still wasn't prepared when Heather told me that she had been to the doctor and had been diagnosed with cervical cancer.

To be specific, Heather had an 8-centimeter tumor on her cervix—so large that performing a hysterectomy, to remove the tumor as well as her female reproductive organs, would be unsafe. She would need to start chemotherapy and radiation as soon as possible.

The first thing I did was give her a huge hug, then I asked, “How could this happen, Heather?” followed by, “How are you feeling? How will you pay for treatments? And, What can *I* do to help?”

Let me deal with these four questions, one by one.

How could this happen?

How could an otherwise healthy, non-smoking 28-year-old woman get such a terrifying diagnosis?

Heather had other bills to pay: rent, electricity, food—I'm sure you've heard, New York City isn't a cheap place to live.

Plus, she was working days and nights as a waitress and bartender, so fitting an annual gynecological check-up into her budget and schedule wasn't a top priority, unfortunately.

Still, Heather had gotten a Pap smear that previous December, in 2004—only *five months* before—and it had come back normal. No signs of precancerous cells, definitely no sign of an 8-centimeter tumor.

This fact was a wake-up call for me—and I hope it is for you, too: The Pap is a live-saving detection tool.

But it's *not* fool-proof.

It can miss precancerous cells up to 30 percent of the time. It works through repetition, by having the test every year—or every several years.

Since most cases of cervical cancer take a long time to develop, sometimes 10 or 15 years, a regular Pap test should detect it along the way.

So that leads us to my next question: How did Heather *feel*?

She told me that she'd had irregular bleeding—when she wasn't having her “time of the month”—and *that's* what finally prompted her to go back to the doctor for a follow-up visit in May.

That's a sign that all women should pay attention to. Yes, we have tools, like the Pap, to detect precancerous cells on our cervix, but we also have to pay attention to our own bodies.

And how was Heather going to pay for treatment?

Even though she had two jobs, neither provided health insurance.

She would have to apply for Medicaid, America's government program to help low-income people cover medical costs.

But how would she pay her *rent*, if she got sick and couldn't work?

Heather's boss at the restaurant where Heather worked threw a fundraising party—and raised enough money so that Heather didn't have to go worry about that. By then, August, Heather was going to the hospital five days a week for chemotherapy and radiation. She told me, "My insides feel sunburned."

It was at this fundraising party that Heather and I *really* talked about what I could do to help her—the last question I'd asked back in May.

Heather said, "I want you to tell my story. I don't want any other woman to go through what I'm going through."

By then, I'd been hearing about a new HPV vaccine that was up for approval by the U.S. Federal Drug Administration, or FDA. The vaccine was the first of its kind:

It would prevent 70 percent of the virus strains that cause the very kind of cancer that Heather was fighting.

This seemed newsworthy to me—and fortunately, my editors at the magazine where I worked agreed. And I got the okay to start writing the story.

I began bringing a tape recorder and camera with me when I'd visit Heather. But we talked just as openly as always.

By September, Heather was getting weaker—her bleeding had gotten very heavy—but the doctors said it was probably because the tumor was breaking up. A good sign.

Two weeks after Heather's final treatment, on Oct. 3, she went into the hospital to have radioactive material implanted into her cervix to obliterate the last of the cancer. But when she woke up from the anesthesia, she found out that the tumor hadn't shrunk enough to try the implant. And, worse, the cancer had spread to her lungs and her tailbone.

She was devastated. I was devastated. Everyone who loved her was devastated.

Before I came to see her in the hospital that day, I went to a T-shirt shop and printed up a shirt with a simple message on it: “I hate tumors.” It was just like this one here [hold up shirt].

The message wasn’t for anyone but Heather’s benefit—it was to give her something to fight for, to lift her spirits, and feel less helpless.

She loved it and put it on that day.

But it didn’t slow down the cancer.

The day after the Thanksgiving holiday, November 24, Heather had to be re-admitted to the hospital, because she was having unrelenting pain—the tumor was pressing on her spine. She was also having trouble breathing and eating.

She didn’t leave that hospital until she was moved to a hospice facility, where she died Dec. 7, 2005, surrounded by friends and family members who’d made the trip to be with her.

She knew just how very much I loved her, because I was able to tell her three days before she passed away, with tears streaming down my face.

Now, I know I’m not the first, only, or last person to lose someone I deeply care about. But writing a story about it—which I was committed to doing, because it was what Heather wanted—was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

I just kept hearing her words in my head, “I don’t want any other woman to go through this.”

The article finally came out in March 2006, and in June that year, the FDA approved the HPV vaccine.

People were finally talking about the disease, and *many* women wrote into the magazine.

Several even said the article had “saved their lives,” because it had prompted them to get a gynecological check-up—where they found out that they had signs of cancer on their cervix.

I know that's exactly what Heather wanted, but to this day, if I had to choose between writing the story—or having Heather alive and talking to you today—there's NO question what I would choose.

In the year that followed the story, I got a chance to talk to cervical cancer survivors—it was healing to me to be reminded that cervical cancer didn't need to be a death sentence.

One of the survivors I became friends with was Tamika Felder, a woman living in Washington, D.C.

Tamika found out that she had cervical cancer at age 25—three years younger than even Heather had been.

Like Heather, Tamika had a job, but no health insurance. Unlike Heather, Tamika was able to have a hysterectomy that probably saved her life.

But just imagine what that must be like at 25. As Tamika says, It's like giving up a child she never had.

Tamika pulled through—with support from her friends and family.

And 5 years ago, she started a non-profit organization called Tamika & Friends, that's committed to overcoming cervical cancer—both by spreading the word about how to prevent it, and offering support to women fighting cervical cancers as well as survivors, like Tamika.

Last year, Tamika asked me to join the board, and I proudly accepted the invitation.

I want to quickly tell you about two things that Tamika & Friends does that I think are important—and what I hope it inspires you to do.

I don't know if you've heard of the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure against breast cancer—it's a series of 5 kilometer runs or walks that take place in October. It attracts a HUGE number of participants, 1 million participants in 2005, the year that Tamika started Tamika & Friends. All of these participants wear pink and show up to spread the message of hope and determination about beating breast cancer.

Well, until Tamika & Friends held the first Walk to Beat the Clock against cervical cancer in May 2007 in Washington, D.C., there was no such thing for cervical cancer fighters and survivors in the U.S.

It's called "Walk to Beat the Clock" because every hour a woman is diagnosed with cervical cancer and every 2.5 hours a woman will die from cervical cancer.

The walks are empowering—and educational—for the participants.

But it isn't the only reason we do them. We also do them to raise funds for the other important programs we offer women.

One program that's very near to Tamika's and my heart, and everyone involved with Tamika & Friends is called the Gift of Giving.

This is a no-strings-attached financial gift that we give to women battling cervical cancer. It can be used for paying their rent, buying groceries for their family, or paying for transportation to take them to their cancer treatments. Women can apply for it on our Web site, tamikaandfriends.org.

I know that if there's this kind of need in America, it is greater around the world, where more than 500,000 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer each year. T&F has even begun getting in Gift of Giving applications from as far away as India and Africa.

Sadly, not everyone we give the Gift of Giving survives. Just this year, a woman—Linda Cooper-Smith, who was a mom from Mississippi—needed money to get to and from her cancer treatments. Tamika & Friends gave her as much money as we could.

But just before coming to Beijing, Tamika told me that Linda's sister had let her know that Linda passed away in early May.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to lose anyone else to this disease. I've already lost my best friend.

We have more tools to prevent this cancer than any other: the Pap test, the HPV test, and the HPV vaccine. And the fact that so many important women are talking it gives me hope.

The one thing we need to remember—in our goal to eradicate cervical cancer around the world—is the message that Heather had marked permanently on her body, right here on the back of her neck [touch back of neck]:

PERSEVERANCE.

Thank you again. It has been an honor to be here.

Please let me know if you have any questions afterward. I will be happy to tell you about Tamika & Friends and anything else you like.