

Fighting Cancer through Fashion- The Story of Dr. Yoko Katagiri

Transcript

Written and Produced by Tabius McCoy

Narrated By Tabius McCoy

AMBI: Sound of Chalk Writing on chalkboard in a college classroom with students and professor teaching (fade in)

Narrator:

So it is 10 a.m. and I am sitting in a classroom on a Wednesday at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

The topic of discussion?...

Economics.

However, that's not what makes this class so unique. It's the person teaching it that does

AMBI: Sound of Chalk Writing on chalkboard in a college classroom with students and professor teaching (fade out)

Yoko Katagiri:

My name is Yoko Katagiri. I go by Yoko Katz on most of my social media.

I am a professor at Fashion Institute of Technology State, University of New York.

I've been teaching economics at FIT for the last 15 years.

Narrator:

Now nine years ago, Katagiri. She was diagnosed with stage one breast cancer.

Katagiri:

For five years, I have been under treatment and it was once clear of my cancer. I still kept teaching at FIT during that time.

Narrator:

So five years after her treatment, Katagiri got some good news. Her cancer was all clear.

But..

One week later something unexpected happened.

MUSIC: "Blue Wind Blow" Blue Dot Sessions (fades in)

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Katagiri:

A week after this clearance I had a seizure and I was taken to an ambulance to the hospital. I was diagnosed. With cancer, now spreading to my brain.

Narrator:

That was ten months ago. Her doctor told her she could continue teaching. But Katagiri's subject matter was fashion - an industry, she says, that had no positive images of cancer patients beyond their diagnosis

Katagiri:

How am I going to teach in front of fashion students talking about fashion and economics I learned that I would lose my hair and I would lose my breast. How I'm going to be myself after the diagnosis was a very big question.

MUSIC: "Blue Wind Blow" Blue Dot Sessions (fades out)

Narrator:

So Katagiri thought maybe she could find beauty in what she was going through. And that was where the idea of Heal in Heels Came about. A blog for newly diagnosed patients about how to use fashion to feel more like themselves.

Katagiri:

I needed to be creative.

I need it to buy some wigs knowing that losing hair the very first wig I bought was in bright orange, very straight hair, bright all in orange, up to the lengths to the shoulder.

Interviewer:

Why Orange? (during conversation)

Katagiri:

Why orange is a very good question, but something that needed to be vivid for me, something that was out of box. Considering the imagery of cancer patients were very fixed images so in order to break the box, I thought nobody has natural bright neon orange in nature as hair.

So I thought it would be bringing out some points that I can make a statement out of the orange wig.

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I went to my friend's house showing off my new wig and she said, "Yoko, that's really a new way of looking into cancer patients. And why don't I document all these styling that I would do over the course of the semester while I go for chemotherapy?" And I said,

"Wow, that's brilliant."

Brief Fade to Silence

Katagiri:

So I said, okay, I have a lot of pictures. So what if I put everything in one picture and placed every one of the outfits that I did for two semesters? Those two semesters were immediately after the opening of the Covid. So I also thought it was a need for society to realize that normalcy was coming back.

Narrator:

As Katagiri is talking to me it's nearly impossible not to notice this vibrant, whimsical top that she's wearing.

Katagiri speaking fades out

It's Navy, it has gold plated buttons going up the center, the top has two identical zippers right at the collarbone and it also has puffy short sleeves, that adds to the top's unique look. But, it would be hard to tell that the same stylish top she's wearing actually serves a unique purpose.

Katagiri:

A lot of patients get poked on their chest from the chemotherapy needle. Anybody who has the port on either side can access to the port by opening this zipper from the top and maybe like two or three inches, you can open them.

Narrator:

Katagiri's optimism and positive energy is something that even her students can attest to, says Benjamin Farleo.

AMBI: Sound of students talking in a college classroom lecture (fade in)

Benjamin Farleo:

The energy that she brings every day bright and early is honestly the reason why I enjoy coming to this class. She always has a smile on her face.

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Benjamin Farleo:

You know, she always has a little quip or a joke at some point in class that at least for me, it gets a chuckle out of me. And to be honest, I view it sort of greater than microeconomics and more so as a sort of inspiration, because to put it bluntly, a lot of people, when faced with challenges such as the challenges that Dr. Katgiri has faced, they may sort of give up or quit.

Katagiri:

I am happy. And it might sound strange that a person who has tumors in the brain, but still saying that they are happy. But that is true because I went through. I know how precious today is. So I enjoy today.

AMBI: Sound of students talking in a college classroom lecture (fade out)

MUSIC: "Lean Dream" Blue Dot Sessions (fade in)

Onomatopoeia - Sounds like New York - is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. This episode was written and produced by Tabius McCoy. Joanne Faryon is our professor and executive producer. Music by blue dot sessions. Special thanks to Peter Leonard.

MUSIC: "Lean Dream" Blue Dot Sessions (fade out)