

Living With Lupus

(GIVING) Brenda Blackmon, co-anchor of My9's WWOR-TV 10 p.m. newscast, says there was a time when she knew nothing about lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease.

Then, while her daughter, Kelly, was away at college, she developed a serious rash that brought her home and, eventually, to a local dermatologist. The diagnosis: lupus.

The disease plays havoc with the body's skin, blood, organs and joints. About 1.4 million Americans have the disorder, which is prevalent in women and three times more common in African-Americans, according to the Alliance for Lupus Research.

"Even after the diagnosis, I was in denial. I thought, 'She'll be fine, it's just a cold,'" says Blackmon, who lives in Tenaflly. In fact her daughter was fine for a while, but then the disease returned, this time more violently. Kelly fell into a coma and lay in intensive care for 52 days. Blackmon was told to prepare for the worst.

"All 14 specialists on her case said she wouldn't make it," Blackmon remembers. "Then one day she opened her eyes. The doctors still call her a miracle." She has been in remission for two years.

Today Blackmon continues her fight for a cure and advocates for patients and their families. She founded the Kelly Fund for Lupus in 2008 to promote awareness and understanding of the disease and improve diagnosis and treatment.

Blackmon also wrote and self-published a book this year, "A Mom's Story," which chronicles her and her daughter's shared journey in fighting the disease. Proceeds from the book go to the Kelly Fund, which supports the ALR.

Blackmon also has testified before an FDA advisory panel concerning Benlysta, a medication that helps control severe symptoms. It's the first lupus drug developed in 50 years.

"More people have lupus than AIDS, muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy combined, but people don't talk about it," says Blackmon. "We have to do something. We don't want to wait another 50 years before we have another breakthrough." For more information, visit thekellyfundforlupus.org.

— Julie Jacobs

