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Vivian Aiko Smallwood: *The One She Almost Left Behind*



INTERVIEW AND STORY BY
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For most of her life, Vivian Aiko Smallwood was the person people could depend on.

If something needed to be done, she handled it. If someone needed support, she was there. It didn't matter who it was or what it required... she gave, and she kept giving. Somewhere in that time, she came to believe this was what she was supposed to do.

And maybe it was.

But what she didn't see... what she couldn't see yet... was how little of her life actually belonged to her.

That didn't become clear until the day she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"Before the diagnosis, I was showing up for everyone," she says. "Everything that came into my life. And if there was anything left over... then I would serve myself."

There usually wasn't.

"For the first time, I started thinking... what about me?"

When Vivian found out she had breast cancer in 2024, her first instinct was to search for a reason.

"I felt like I must have done something wrong," she explains. "So I started looking at my life, trying to figure it out."

Even then, she approached it the only way she knew how... by trying to solve it.

"I wanted to find a cure for myself," she states. "Because I still wanted to be there for the people in my life."

But in the middle of that urgency, something unfamiliar surfaced... something she hadn't made room for before. ***Herself.***

"For the first time, I started thinking... what about me?"

It was a question she hadn't given herself permission to ask. Somehow, she had been putting herself last without even noticing.

Long before the diagnosis, her days started early... sometimes as early as three in the morning, when most people were still asleep.

She would wake up intending to spend time with God, but her mind rarely stayed there.

By the time she got out of bed, she was already moving... mentally, emotionally, and physically.

There was always something waiting, or someone who needed her.

"I thought I was spending time with God," she says. "But really, I was thinking about everything I needed to do."

That pace became normal.

So normal, she didn't question it... ***until her body did.***

In 2017, Vivian had a stroke.



She didn't recognize it at first. She remembers standing in the bathroom, trying to reach for something simple, and her body not responding the way it should.

"Wait a minute... something's not right," she recalls thinking.

At the hospital, doctors explained what had led to the stroke. Stress was a major factor.

But to her, it didn't feel like stress. It felt like life.

She had been living at that level for so long, she no longer recognized it as harmful.

Later, she would learn it wasn't her first stroke. That's when it became harder to ignore. The way she had been living was starting to show up in her body in ways she never would have noticed if she hadn't taken action to see her doctor.

And in that moment, she knew she had to let go of who she thought she had to be.

The change didn't happen overnight. It came through uncomfortable truths, the kind you can't unsee once they surface.

Vivian began to see the pattern clearly. She had spent years trying to be everything to everyone. She took on responsibilities that weren't hers and held herself to a standard that left no room for grace.

"I had to forgive myself," she says. "For thinking I had to be perfect. For thinking I knew what was best for me."

But that wasn't all.

"I had to forgive myself for the things nobody knew about," she admits, "and apologize to my body for how I had mistreated it: for the choices I made, for the pressure I placed on myself, and for spending so much time being everything for everyone else that I stopped showing up for me."

Let God meet you where you are.

That kind of honesty doesn't come easily. It asks you to sit with who you've been, and accept it without looking away. And for someone who had built her life on holding everything together, that was the real challenge.

What changed for Vivian wasn't just her circumstances. It was how she moved through them. Her mornings look different now.

"Now I wake up and just say thank you," she says. "I don't rush into everything I have to do. I give myself space to welcome my day."

It sounds easy, but for her, it's a complete shift. There's no immediate pressure. No rush to get ahead of everything. Just a moment to be present.

And for her, that changed *everything*.

Vivian doesn't describe peace as the absence of problems. She knows better than that. For her, peace is the ability to face life without being consumed by it.

"It doesn't mean everything is perfect," she shares. "But whatever comes, I know I'm okay."

That sense of peace wasn't something she found outside herself. It came from releasing the need to control everything and trusting that she could let go... and still be fine.

"I used to think I had to hold everything together," she admits. "Now I know I don't."

What she has now isn't dependent on circumstances. It's something she's built within herself.

If there's one thing she would say to someone feeling overwhelmed, it's this: "Be still."

*I had to forgive myself for
what nobody knew about...*

Not as a phrase, but as something you practice.

From the date of her diagnosis of breast cancer to today, Vivian consistently practices just that by being in nature daily. Whether it means feeling the warmth of the sun while lying on the sand at the beach; listening to the rustling of fallen leaves while hiking in the woods; smelling the sweet fragrance of honeysuckle blossoms while walking with L'il Girl, her Yorkie, her greatest supporter; or following the path of water circling around rocks in a creek, Vivian allows herself the time to be still.

"Just be quiet," she says. "Let God meet you where you are."

Vivian spent years being everything for everyone else.

What she's learning now is how to be present for herself without feeling like she's taking something away from someone else.

It's not about doing less. It's about no longer believing she has to do everything.

And if she could speak to the version of herself who believed she had to be everything for everyone, she wouldn't try to fix anything.

She would simply say: "*I love you.*"

Because after everything, that's what she needed *most*.



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