

## Breast Cancer Survivor Thanks Project Self-Sufficiency for her Life



Breast cancer survivor Susan Helfrich credits Project Self-Sufficiency for saving her life. Ill with the flu in 2013, Helfrich was visiting the doctor when she spotted a flyer promoting free mammograms to be held at the agency two days later. "I was compelled to go," she recalls, so she phoned Project Self-Sufficiency to schedule an appointment. At the time, Helfrich, 59, had not had a screening

mammogram in eight years. The mammogram she received at Project Self-Sufficiency detected a suspicious mass in one of Helfrich's breasts. Further testing revealed that Helfrich had Stage Two breast cancer. "I was so scared. I regret that I did not do self-exams all those years," added Helfrich, who was able to feel the tumor once it had been diagnosed.

Breast cancer is often a silent disease, with virtually no symptoms, but it is often completely curable if diagnosed in its early stages. In 1980, the five-year survival rate for women diagnosed with early stage breast cancer was about 74%; today that number is 99%. There are currently more than 3.1 million breast cancer survivors in the United States.

Surgery was scheduled quickly for Helfrich, but she endured several, painful complications which forced her to delay the start of her chemotherapy treatments. While she was recovering, Helfrich made plans to see The Eagles in concert at a nearby venue. "Music has been mentally and physically healing for me," she explains. "It is just as important as getting chemotherapy to me." Friends sewed a special sweatshirt and Helfrich decorated a black top hat with an Eagles patch leading up to the event. Her hat would quickly become a signature accessory for Helfrich, who has continued to decorate it and sport it at numerous special events ever since.

The side effects of chemotherapy were particularly difficult for Helfrich to overcome. "I did not handle it well," she notes. She was hospitalized more than once due to dehydration and other issues. "Most of the time I was bedridden." Her parents and her boyfriend cared for Helfrich during her treatments and recovery. She adds, "Losing my hair was very traumatic for me. I asked my boyfriend to shave my head because I was determined to take it off myself and not let cancer take it from me."

Breast cancer does not run in Helfrich's family. In fact, the majority of those diagnosed with breast cancer each year have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to practice effective early detection techniques, such as annual mammograms and self-exams. A mammogram is 85% - 90% effective at detecting breast cancer. Mammograms may detect breast cancer up to two years before they can be felt through clinical or self-examinations. Recent studies have shown that mammography can reduce the chances of death from breast cancer by 30%. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

According to data compiled recently by the Komen for the Cure® North Jersey Affiliate, almost 33% of women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County have not had a mammogram

in the past year, a percentage which is marginally better than some of the other counties in the agency's 9-county service area in northern New Jersey. However, Sussex County has the highest incidence of incurable breast cancer in the state, primarily because the cancer is not being detected at its earliest, most curable, stage. The average 5-year mortality rate across all ethnic groups in Sussex County is 33.4%, almost 7 percentage points higher than the 9-county average of 26.5%.

Helfrich eventually recovered from the physical complications of her breast cancer treatments, but she continued to be challenged emotionally. She joined a support group and sought counseling to help her through. "I was not able to eat or sleep and I was filled with fear. Being around other cancer patients makes me realize that I am not going crazy," explains Helfrich. In addition to herself, several of Helfrich's family members were also in varied stages of cancer diagnosis, treatment and recovery. "I was in a pretty horrible spot. There is no shame in asking for help. The counselors gave me the tools I needed to handle my situation." Helfrich continues to meditate and meet regularly with counselors, "Even when you have recovered, you have your moments!"

Helfrich has been a featured speaker at several events commemorating cancer survivors. She wears her signature hat each time. "Whenever I go to an event, I wear my top hat so that my fellow survivors will recognize me. I'm kind of a free spirit anyway, and that's how I choose to roll with it." She makes a point of recommending mammograms each time she appears. "My most passionate, personal campaign is to make sure that women get their mammograms on time. Project Self-Sufficiency saved my life by offering that free mammogram. My goal is to have more survivors!"

Project Self-Sufficiency is currently searching for Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign. Their story would appear in the *New Jersey Herald* and on the Project Self-Sufficiency website. Interested participants are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

The New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED) Program, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the State of New Jersey, provides funding to all twenty-one counties in the State for comprehensive breast, cervical, prostate, and colorectal cancer education, outreach, and screening. Men and women whose income is under 250% of the Federal poverty level and have no insurance are eligible for the program. Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the NJ CEED program; follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies can also be provided. Interested participants are encouraged to call 973-579-0750, ext. 1246. In addition, Newton Medical Center will provide a free mammogram for women who qualify through the Newton Medical Center Foundation's "Mammograms Save Lives" program. Those without health insurance are encouraged to contact Newton Medical Center's Education/Outreach office at 973-579-8340 for more information.

