

Thirtieth Anniversary of Breast Cancer Diagnosis Celebrated by Giving Back



Thirty years ago, Connie Van Orden was a recently-divorced, single mother who was focused on raising her fifteen-year-old daughter and twelve-year-old son. At 34 years of age, Van Orden was healthy and physically fit with no family history of breast cancer. When she discovered a lump in one of her breasts she immediately sought medical attention. After a screening mammogram and a biopsy, the lump was determined to be benign.

Relieved, Van Orden went on with her busy life. Eighteen months later, a lump returned in the same spot and once again a mammogram and a biopsy were administered. This time, the lump was malignant. "It was quite traumatic for me," recalls Van Orden. "Both my parents had died from lung cancer, but there was no history of breast cancer in my family and I did not fit the profile of a typical breast cancer patient."

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 national 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. One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet the majority have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram.

According to the New Jersey Department of Health, breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed among New Jersey women and the second leading cause of death, after lung cancer, attributed to cancer in the state. In 2014, 7,488 New Jersey women were diagnosed with breast cancer. The rate at which new cases of breast cancer are being diagnosed in Sussex County, as well as in the rest of the state, is stable, according to the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control. The county's breast cancer death rate is also falling, in accordance with state and national trends. However, the disease contributes to the death of 1,300 New Jersey women annually. Access to breast cancer screenings and optimal treatments is an urgent public health issue.

After receiving her diagnosis, Van Orden wasted no time in selecting her next course of action. "I started looking into the options that gave me the best chance for survival and the best prognosis I could get because my two kids were depending on me," she explains. "I knew I had to stay around for a long time because I had kids to raise!"

Van Orden elected to have a radical mastectomy which allowed her to forgo subsequent chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Telling her children about her situation was difficult. "I had to sit them down and explain the whole procedure. It was tough. They were really upset."

At the time, Van Orden was employed full-time as an insurance agent and auto travel professional. She worked in an

office and participated in safety seminars. Although her colleagues insisted that she take all the time she needed, Van Orden was back at her desk two weeks after her surgery. "It was caught very early so I was very fortunate," notes Van Orden, adding that support from her family and co-workers helped her to get through the process. "I was very determined. I was not going to let it get me!"

Ten years later, Van Orden decided to embark on a new career path. As a young woman, Van Orden had been on the precipice of starting nursing school when her plans were derailed by the need to care for her mother who had just been diagnosed with cancer. Van Orden eventually shelved her dreams of a medical career and went into office work instead. However, her desire for a career in healthcare never completely dissipated. With the support of her new husband, Les, Van Orden returned to school, obtained her degree as a Certified Nursing Assistant and worked in the field for seventeen years.

"Having breast cancer definitely changed me. It was an awakening for me. It made me a stronger person and it made me even more determined. I don't sweat the small stuff because so many people have it so much worse." Van Orden returns for a screening mammogram annually and has had a clean bill of health for thirty years. After reading a recent article in the New Jersey Herald about a breast cancer survivor, she decided that it was time to tell her own story. "I'm retired now and it's time for me to reach out and give back. Young women need to be encouraged to be proactive with their own health. Tell your doctor you want a mammogram!"

Breast Cancer Survivors Sought for Public Relations Campaign
Project Self-Sufficiency spearheads a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offers breast health education with the goal of encouraging local women to take a proactive role in monitoring their health. Local breast cancer survivors who are willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

Free Breast Health Services Available

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 973-579-0570, extension 1246 or 1248. 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.

