

Local Businesswoman Doesn't Let Breast Cancer Hold Her Back



Fifteen years ago, Katie Reilly was unemployed, so like many of those who are out of work, she put off her annual physical in order to save money. The decision to also postpone her annual mammogram almost cost her life. "I had symptoms of breast cancer, but I didn't realize that was what they were," noted Reilly, referring to the telltale dimpling of

the skin on her affected breast along with some erratic discharge. When she finally made it to the doctor a year later, a mammogram was scheduled immediately, and cancer was detected. Within months, Reilly had undergone a biopsy, surgery and had begun chemotherapy.

Thanks to a flexible schedule devised by her new employer, Reilly managed to continue working throughout her chemotherapy treatments. She was even allowed to take a short nap in the middle of the day while staying at the office. As an information technology specialist for an insurance company, Reilly's job required her to spend a lot of time in face-to-face meetings with clients and other computer professionals. During and after her chemotherapy treatments, she struggled with the side effect commonly known as "chemo brain." Noted Reilly, "You know what you want to think and say but you just can't quite grab it. The good news is that chemo brain goes away. You get your brain back!"

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. Like most patients who develop breast cancer, Reilly had no history of the disease in her family. 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 2013, more than 7,500 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.

The married mother of a young son, Reilly was reluctant to fully disclose the news about her cancer to her youngster, who was only 8 years old at the time. Instead, she told the adults in

her extended family, who promptly leaked the diagnosis to Reilly's son. So Reilly had a frank discussion about the topic with her young boy. "I had to tell him that I was going to be in the hospital," remarked Reilly, who spoke very highly of the support services which were available there for children whose parents were undergoing treatment for cancer.

"Unfortunately, being an only child, it was rough for him."

Reilly's friends, neighbors and several members of her church banded together to provide meals and cleaning services for Reilly during her recovery. "I couldn't thank them enough. The support of family, friends and church really helped." Still, doubts about whether or not she would recover lingered. "I used to wonder will there ever be a day that goes by when I don't think about cancer. But you do get past it. Life goes on."

Reilly's hair began to fall out soon after beginning chemotherapy. However, she took the hair loss in stride. "Losing my hair was devastating when it first happened, but it was lovely after it was gone. To not have to get up and fuss with your hair was a treat!"

To those women who may be confronting the possibility of breast cancer or contemplating whether or not to get a mammogram, Reilly offers the following advice, "Don't put it off. Get the mammogram. Being afraid of the disease is worse than dealing with it, because there is an end in sight and life goes on. It's wonderful."

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. Sussex County 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 973-579-0750, 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.

