

A Routine Mammogram Saved Her Life



Although she works at Project Self-Sufficiency, a non-profit agency that promotes early detection as the key to battling breast cancer, it never crossed Sarah Coraggio's mind that personal experience with the disease would cause her to endorse annual mammograms for other women. There was no history of the disease in her

family, and Sarah was slim, exercised regularly, and ate a healthy diet. Catching a quick glimpse of a brochure from the Susan G. Komen Foundation was all it took for Sarah to schedule a routine mammogram for herself. She was stunned to learn that she had cancer in both breasts.

After discussing her treatments options with her oncologist, Sarah selected surgery followed by chemotherapy. Taking time off from work for recovery was not an option for Sarah. "Right from the beginning I knew that I didn't want to stay home during my treatments. I have tried to keep my regular work schedule as much as possible. Working during this period in my life helped me to forget about my situation and made these last nine months seem to go faster."

The married mother of three, Sarah notes that while her husband, Peter, was shocked by her diagnosis, her sons reacted differently. "They were surprised but not too upset. I was very accepting of the situation and I think that helped them deal with it."

Like many women who undergo chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer, Sarah lost her hair. However she dealt with it by giving herself pep-talks, wearing a variety of wigs donated by friends and family members, and when all else failed, she wore hats to the office. "The support from my co-workers was wonderful," notes Sarah. During one meeting, Sarah's co-workers burst into applause when she removed her hat and triumphantly revealed her bald pate. Sarah joined other Project Self-Sufficiency employees in the Susan G. Komen North Jersey Race for the Cure® in late April, and everyone on the team sported t-shirts emblazoned with the words "Sarah's Sisters". "Since the timing of the race was three months after my last chemotherapy treatment, having a team in my honor made the event sort of a celebration for me," comments Sarah. "It was fun and exciting. Seeing all the other teams supporting individuals and the cause confirmed to me that there is a lot of compassion and love all around us, and that together we can make a difference."

For those women who may be facing a diagnosis of breast cancer in the near future, Sarah advises, "Don't panic and don't be afraid. It is very different

now than it used to be. You have to maintain the attitude that you will be in the majority and that you will be fine after your treatments. Life has thrown you a curve ball and your job is to hit it as fast and hard as possible and get a home run!"

Like Sarah, the majority of women who contract breast cancer have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram. Project Self-Sufficiency, in conjunction with the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®, Intercar Mercedes Benz, Sussex Honda, the New Jersey Herald, and the Sussex County Cancer Coalition have sponsored a campaign, "Mammograms Save Lives," to underscore the importance of annual mammograms to the residents of Sussex County. Sussex County has the highest incidence of incurable diagnoses of breast cancer in the state. In fact, while the mortality rate for breast cancer in the state of New Jersey dropped -8.9% from 1997 to 2005, mortality in Sussex County rose +9.5% during the same period.

These alarming statistics have led to the creation of the Sussex County Breast Health Task Force, a coalition of non-profit organizations, health experts and local businesses whose goal is to increase the rate of early detection of breast cancer in Sussex County women. Early detection is essential in the fight against breast cancer; the survival rate for women who detected breast cancer in its earliest stages has reached 98%. 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. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Free mammograms are offered regularly at Project Self-Sufficiency to uninsured and underinsured women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County, thanks to the support of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®. The next available date for a free mammogram is June 10th. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. In addition, Newton Memorial Hospital will provide a free mammogram for women who qualify through the Newton Memorial Hospital Foundation's "Mammograms Save Lives" program. Those without health insurance are encouraged to contact Newton Memorial Hospital's Education/Outreach office at 973-579-8340 for more information.

