

Breast Cancer Survivor Relies on Faith and Family



With a family history of breast cancer, Sussex County resident Cathy Roy had always been vigilant about receiving annual mammograms. She was also proactive about getting annual check-ups, following a healthy diet, and exercising regularly. She was rewarded each year with a clean bill of health. At

the age of 50, she uncharacteristically allowed the date for her annual mammogram to pass by. Nine months later, she discovered a pea-sized lump in one of her breasts. Cathy's dense breast tissue masked the presence of the lump on the mammogram she ultimately received, but a follow-up ultrasound showed a cyst along with an enlarged lymph node. A biopsy revealed that Cathy had Stage Two breast cancer.

Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2009, the year that the most recent statistics are available, more than 40,000 women died as a result. Breast cancer is often a silent disease, with virtually no symptoms, but it is often completely curable if diagnosed in its early stages. 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 get an annual mammogram. 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%.

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. 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.

Cathy Roy was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. Her treatment plan included more than 5 months of chemotherapy followed by 7 weeks of radiation. Remarkably, Cathy continued to work in the Research Division at Merck (formerly Schering Plough) through most of that time. She credits her fitness level for giving her the stamina to endure. "It was not easy but it was better for me to be at work," noted Cathy. "I didn't feel great, but I was not terribly nauseous. I was more tired."

Cathy is very grateful to her fellow employees who

allowed her to leave work early on some days in order for her to arrive at her medical appointments on time. They even took up a donation and hired a cleaning service for Cathy's house. "My family got the worst of me," joked Cathy. Her college-age son assisted Cathy by transporting her to her chemotherapy treatments, and her high-school-aged daughter helped with the cooking and cleaning at home. Friends brought food and goodie bags packed with things they knew that Cathy would need. "My husband was wonderful," remarked Cathy. "You can't do this alone. You have to have some kind of support system. You must reach out to somebody, because it makes it so much easier."

Cathy was surprised to find that the experience of having cancer strengthened her faith. "I can honestly say that I did not pray for God to make my cancer go away, although I have to admit, there were times I prayed for the pain from the medication to stop and to maybe not be so exhausted," noted Cathy. "But mostly, I really came to know God more, feel His presence and ask for strength to get through whatever it was I was dealing with, the pain, the chemo, the hair loss. And He did."

One year after being diagnosed with breast cancer, Cathy ran in a half marathon, finishing the race in two hours and one minute. "When I crossed the finish line, I wanted to cry. I did not want my cancer to stop me from doing something that I had planned to do, and it didn't."

Cathy recommends mammograms fervently. "You have to be vigilant about your own health." Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Tuesday, June 18th, from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, thanks to the support of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®. To conduct the tests, two technicians with a state-of-the-art mammography machine set up shop at the agency's Community Education Center. Women are examined discreetly and their test results are made available within days. In the past few years, hundreds of women have received free mammograms through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

Women who are interested in receiving a free mammogram are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program at Saint Clare's Hospital in Sussex. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. Interested participants are encouraged to call the hospital at 973-702-2740. 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.

