

## Self-Proclaimed Poster Child Credits Mammography for Saving Her Life



"I am the poster child for digital mammography," declares Kate Imparato, the survivor of a particularly lethal form of breast cancer. Having neglected her annual physicals for three years, a visit to her doctor for a sinus infection led Kate to renewing her commitment to her own health. She scheduled a routine mammogram and was stunned to learn that she had breast cancer. "I had no history of

breast cancer in my family. This really did save my life."

One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet like Kate, the majority of them have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram. Kate's surgeon, Dr. Michelle O'Shea, scheduled a biopsy and selected a treatment program for Kate which included six rounds of intensive chemotherapy, followed by radiation and a maintenance course of the drug Herceptin. As with most patients, Kate lost her hair as a result of her chemotherapy treatments. However, she bought a wig and stoically continued to go to work.

Kate is employed as the Assistant Vice President of Legal Compliance and Regulatory Affairs at Selective Insurance in Branchville. Her work day consists of poring over legal documents, attending meetings and writing reports. During her months of intensive chemotherapy, Kate went on partial short term disability which allowed her to adjust her work schedule to match her physical well-being. "My employer has been extremely flexible. I came in on weekends when I felt up to it. When I was feeling good, work was a nice distraction."

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. 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.

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®. 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 nine months, more than 100 women have been able to receive a mammogram through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

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. The effort includes flyers, billboards and newspaper ads, along with a public relations campaign.

Ten months after her diagnosis, Kate feels healthy and strong. Kate celebrated her 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday on July 21<sup>st</sup> by triumphantly returning to work without the wig which she had been sporting since her hair loss. "I am very upbeat because my hair grew back, so as a birthday present to myself, I got a pixie haircut and colored my hair. Just losing that wig, I feel like I'm back, I'm me again. I'm exercising and I feel great. I feel totally normal and healthy. Because my cancer was caught early, my prognosis is very good."

Although Kate still receives treatment with Herceptin, she is experiencing no physical side effects, with the exception of lingering chemo brain. Difficulties with word retrieval and occasional misspellings cause Kate to note, "You laugh or you cry. Chemotherapy is not what is used to be and breast cancer is not a death sentence. I view it as a chronic condition. My prognosis is for a very long life. This was just a brief interruption. The good news is that we have made great strides in the treatment and the cure for breast cancer; we just have not made great strides in determining the cause."

Free mammograms are offered frequently to uninsured and underinsured women over the age of 40 at Project Self-Sufficiency. The next available date for a free mammogram is Thursday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. 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.

