

Local Grandmother Regrets Neglecting Her Health



Joyce Rinaldi spent most of 2011 fighting for her life. In December, 2010, after avoiding the issue for years, Joyce reluctantly submitted to a mammogram and learned that she had Stage Two Breast Cancer. Years before, a routine mammogram had detected a suspicious mass in one of her breasts. The mass turned out to be benign, but Joyce was warned at that time about the signs of breast cancer.

She chose to ignore them. She continued to smoke, and she admits that she was negligent about receiving annual mammograms. In the meantime, the mass in her breast became painful, and the surface of her skin began to dimple. When she could not bear the pain any longer, Joyce made an appointment with her physician. It was too late.

Breast cancer strikes more than 200,000 women each year, and in 2007, 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. 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. 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.

During the early part of last year, Joyce endured six rounds of chemotherapy to shrink the tumors in her breast so that surgery could be performed. Her hair fell out, and she was fatigued, but she continued to work throughout her treatments as an office manager at Goble Funeral Homes in Sparta. "Between my family, my co-workers and my friends, the amount of support I got

was wonderful," notes Joyce, who credits that support with helping her to survive what she has identified as her "blue days."

Joyce underwent three separate surgical procedures, and was suddenly hospitalized for a fourth time to treat a severe infection. In the autumn of 2011, she endured 5 weeks of radiation treatments. At this time, the onslaught of surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation began to take its toll, and her thyroid levels skyrocketed. Joyce continued her fight. "My focus was on getting better. I decided I was going to beat this. Cancer had met its match. You don't mess with a girl from the Bronx!" She was finally declared cancer free in January of 2012.

Joyce is the mother of two and the grandmother of five. Her determination to beat breast cancer is based on her love for her family. "Mammograms are very important. If you don't do it for yourself, do it for your family. If you love your family, you've got to do it every year," comments Joyce, who wants her story to be told so that others do not make the same mistakes she made.

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 few years, hundreds of women have received free mammograms through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Thursday, May 31st, from 10:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED's) program at St. Clare's Hospital in Sussex. 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.

