

Breast Cancer Survivor Takes Extra Precautions During Covid-19 Scare



Sussex County preschool teacher Denise Bellini has a family history of breast cancer, leading her to faithfully obtain annual screening mammograms for almost 30 years without incident. At the age of 58, her yearly mammogram detected a mass so small that it was not visible to Bellini when the radiologist shared the image with her. Further testing

revealed a diagnosis of Stage 1B breast cancer. “Given my family history, I was expecting it,” noted Bellini. “But it was still very upsetting.”

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. One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet about 85% of these women have no family history of the disease.

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 2015, 7,584 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.

Bellini’s diligence in obtaining annual mammograms over the years paid off. Her breast cancer was detected at such an early stage that she was able to skip chemotherapy and begin receiving aggressive radiation treatments as soon as she recovered from a lumpectomy. The radiation caused extreme fatigue, but Bellini continued to go to work at a local elementary school every day. She credits her colleagues for helping her through a difficult time. “I worked with a very supportive group of teachers. I couldn’t have done it without them.”

In the years since her diagnosis and recovery, Bellini has struggled with the side effects of medication, as well as lymphedema. She recently celebrated her fifth anniversary of survival. The celebration was dimmed somewhat by the prevalence of the Covid-19 virus in the community. Now considered high risk because of her age and her medical history, Bellini limits her interactions with people. “It puts me in a higher risk category, so I must be really careful.” She teaches her classes and communicates with parents by calling or using an app on her phone. “When I go out, I practice social distancing and I wear a mask and gloves.”

“Having cancer made me realize how lucky I am, especially when I see women who suffer with breast cancer so much more than me. Every day, I and my sister survivors, live with the side effects of breast cancer, but the most important word is ‘live.’ I don’t take anything for granted anymore. Cancer will always be a part of my life. The last few weeks have been difficult for all of us, but I’m realizing that our new way of life is ‘a whole new race.’” Bellini even popped a thank you card in the mail to the medical team who detected her breast cancer all those years ago. “A mammogram is not painful, and it could definitely save your life.”

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 973-579-0570, extension 1246 or 1248. 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.

