

Vigilance Saves Local Woman's Life



Having worked as a medical receptionist for many years, Beth Zisa learned to be vigilant about her health. She received annual mammograms and gynecological exams despite the fact that there was no history of cancer in her family. She was shocked when a routine mammogram found a tumor in one of her breasts. After enduring multiple ultrasounds, an MRI and ten biopsies, she waited for two weeks to receive the results. "I almost dropped dead when my doctor called and told me I had cancer." She hung up the phone and started to cry.

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.

Beth's situation was unusually complicated. Once surgery was initiated to remove the cancerous growth, another more advanced form of cancer was found beneath the original tumor. Her physician recommended a double mastectomy. "I didn't even have to think about it," noted Beth. "I just said 'Do it.'" Once she recovered from the surgery, Beth began chemotherapy treatments. She experienced very little nausea, but began to lose her hair. "That was worse than losing my boobs!" Eventually, she took matters into her

own hands and shaved her head herself. She sported a variety of wigs, and once her hair grew in, she styled it to match her favorite wig.

Beth surprised herself and her friends with the strength she mustered to get herself through her cancer treatments and recovery. Several personal tragedies coincided with her diagnosis, including being laid off from her position as a medical receptionist the month before the mammogram that detected the original tumor. "I was so strong, I shocked myself," noted Beth. "If you are negative, it's not good, so I decided to be positive. I was going to fight it." Following her recovery, Beth found work in a friend's bakery. Although her spare time is limited, she occasionally volunteers to counsel cancer patients who are undergoing chemotherapy. She participates in the annual Race for the Cure on behalf of the Komen for the Cure® North Jersey, and she is also an ardent supporter of the benefits of mammograms.

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, March 28th, 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. 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.

