

Bout with Breast Cancer Leads Local Woman to Return to School



A preschool aide and the mother of two teen age sons, Donna Blair had a full life working and caring for her family. She was unusually proactive about receiving annual mammograms, beginning the practice at the age of 35. Almost 20 years went by without mishap, but when a routine mammogram turned up a questionable mass, Donna followed the advice of a friend, and went to see a breast specialist. Although everything appeared to be fine during her appointment, the physician elected to do a biopsy as a precautionary measure. Two days later, Donna received the news that the cyst was malignant. She had Stage 3A breast cancer. Donna was shocked. "You're kind of in a fog. It was awful."

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.

Donna eventually had three surgical procedures to remove the cancerous tissue from her body. Because of the location of the cancer, Donna had to undergo rigorous physical therapy as part of her recovery plan. She attacked her treatment plan with vigor, fearing that she would lose the ability to move her arm if she wasn't compliant. Donna also underwent 8 rounds of chemotherapy, ingesting 2 different types of medication. She followed up the chemotherapy with 30 days of radiation treatments. "I was more frightened of the chemo than the surgery," she noted. As the side effects of the chemotherapy began to take its toll, depression set in. "After the third treatment, I felt so sorry for myself. I felt awful."

Donna had an epiphany in the middle of her course of chemotherapy, recognizing that a positive outlook was the only thing that was going to pull her through. "I changed my whole mindset. I told myself that I have to be positive.

Somebody is always worse off than you."

The realization galvanized Donna to help others. She began counseling other cancer patients in her doctor's office, and the practice gave her strength. She now recognizes that having cancer has changed her in many ways, "A lot of good has come out of it. I am more patient about things. I appreciate a lot of things. I have more confidence in myself."

So much confidence, in fact, that Donna has returned to school to obtain an Associate Degree in Child Development with the hope that she can one day run her own classroom. "I can't believe that I am going back to school."

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. Donna is a strong advocate for the value of an annual mammogram. "A mammogram is the only power that we have over breast cancer. It's the only way to fight it."

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.

Donna credits her two teenage sons, her husband and a large group of friends for helping her recover. "We have a wonderful family. My husband is super positive about everything. My girlfriends came to my chemotherapy treatments, and every night for almost 2 months, I had dinner waiting for me when I came home. That was really something else." Cancer free for four years, Donna says, "I feel like a got a new lease on life. Keep on surviving, that's what I'm doing."

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Thursday, December 1st, 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.

