

Breast Cancer Survivor Passes Gift of Knowledge to her Daughter



Few people would believe that receiving a positive diagnosis for breast cancer was a good thing. However, Deb Kohle, who was diagnosed with breast cancer 14 years ago at the age of 39, tells her teenage daughter that she has been given a rare gift. “She has been given the gift of knowledge. I didn’t smoke, I didn’t drink; I had no risk factors. There was

no reason to think that I would get breast cancer. Things are different for my daughter.”

Deb was wrong about one thing; breast cancer does run in her family. Deb’s maternal aunt was diagnosed with breast cancer two years prior to Deb, and Deb’s own mother received a similar diagnosis five years after Deb. All three women are doing well thanks in part to early detection.

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.

Deb found her breast cancer through a self-examination. “I had a thickening of the skin and it was sore,” she says. She saw a physician and immediately received a mammogram followed by a lumpectomy. The diagnosis was Stage One breast cancer. Unlike most breast cancer patients, Deb received radiation treatments first, followed by

chemotherapy. Because her cancer was diagnosed at an early stage, the medication she received did not result in hair loss. “I got through it. I drove myself to the hospital every three weeks and then drove myself home,” commented Deb. “The mixture I was given was not horrendous. The bruises after the radiation were more of a hindrance.”

Deb had two young children and was a stay-at-home mother during her treatment. “Having cancer put many things into perspective for me. It definitely rearranged my priority list.”

Although Deb had been proactive about getting mammograms for herself, she now advocates early detection and offers a clear message to those who may be balking at getting a mammogram. “Do it! You must be responsible for yourself.” She continues, “There are so many people out there who talk about breast cancer and support each other. Once you’re in the club, and it is a club, there is so much there for you. Only people in that club truly get it. They know that you are tired, that you have that taste in your mouth, and that you have to keep it together because everything around you is falling apart.”

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, January 31st, 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 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.

