

Routine Mammogram Detects Breast Cancer in Local Woman



Jacqueline Catalina has always been proactive about her healthcare, obtaining annual check-ups and routine screening mammograms, despite having no family history of breast cancer or any other cause for concern. More than once, Catalina has been asked to return for a second view following her annual mammogram. Each time the second screening turned up nothing unusual. When the 51-year-old Byram resident received a phone call from

her physician following her most recent mammogram requesting that she return for further testing, Catalina was not concerned. "It didn't bother me at first," she recalls. "But during the ultrasound, the mammogram technician kept asking me questions, so I knew immediately that something was wrong. Still, when the radiologist came in and said the word 'malignant,' I was shocked."

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. However, according to a comprehensive study compiled from 2006 - 2010 by the Komen North Jersey Affiliate among women in the agency's nine-county area, women in Sussex County, New Jersey, have fewer breast health screenings than women in the remaining eight counties, due in part to a limited understanding of breast health.

Following a biopsy by a breast surgeon, Catalina was diagnosed with Stage Two, Triple Negative breast cancer. She underwent surgery, followed by five months of chemotherapy and 28 days of radiation treatment. Catalina is nonchalant about the hair loss she experienced, noting, "It was cosmetic to me. It didn't bother me at all." She did experience other side effects, including the mental foginess colloquially referred to as chemo brain, as well as a hypersensitivity to sensory issues. Both have since been resolved.

The mother of two teenage daughters, Catalina took her doctor's advice and underwent genetic testing as a precautionary measure. She was relieved to learn that the results were negative. "I told my kids that the cancer was found by a routine screening, and that it was found early, so they didn't need to be worried about me. They were upset, of course, because the 'C' word is tough to hear, but I showed them by being positive about it that I was going to be fine. Of course, what I showed them and what I believed was a different story! I am a realist."

Catalina took a brief leave of absence from her job as business analyst for a financial services company in order to focus on her treatment and recovery. During that time, she relied upon her husband for support. "It was a rough surgery, but my husband has been great. He really helped me manage. He took care of everything while I was recuperating."

Because her company allowed her to work from home, Catalina returned to work full-time even while she was going through chemotherapy. "If I had not been able to work remotely I would not have been able to work throughout the chemotherapy process," she explains. She has gradually returned to commuting to her Parsippany office as her health has improved. "I had a stressful job and this made me take a break. I'm not going to let myself get

into that position again. I am taking more time to build up the relationships I had to let go while I was recuperating."

Catalina's surgeon commended her on her diligence about obtaining annual screenings, noting that triple negative breast cancer is a particularly aggressive type of cancer. Consequently, Catalina strongly encourages women to get screening mammograms, remarking thoughtfully, "That mammogram saved my life."

The Susan G. Komen North Jersey Affiliate, the local arm of the national organization, covers nine counties in northern New Jersey, including Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren. During 2006 – 2010, breast health screenings among Sussex County women was markedly lower at 71% versus a 79% rate of screenings in the remainder of the coverage area. The late stage diagnosis of breast cancer in Sussex County hovered at 52.8% while other counties in Komen North Jersey service area tallied a 46.1% late stage incidence of breast cancer. In addition, the county had an astounding rate of 29.5% breast cancer-related deaths per 100,000 people during the four-year period. By comparison, other counties in the agency's nine county service area had a much lower rate of 24.7%.

For the past five years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered free mammograms to area women via a mobile mammography unit several times a year. Organizers hope that boosting education about breast health and offering access to screening mammograms will help turn around the negative breast cancer trends in Sussex County.

Free mammograms will be offered on Thursday, March 23rd, at Hopatcong Borough Hall, 111 River Styx Road, in Hopatcong, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Mammograms will be available by appointment to uninsured women over the age of 40; some income-eligibility guidelines apply. To make an appointment for a free mammogram, call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

Project Self-Sufficiency is currently searching for Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign. Their story would appear in the *New Jersey Herald* and on the Project Self-Sufficiency website. Interested participants are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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 973-579-0750, ext. 1246. 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.

