

Breast Cancer Survivor Relies on Family and Friends for Support



"I've had a rough life," admits Sussex County breast cancer survivor Rhonda Kays. Diagnosed with polio at the age of two, sidelined by a heart attack at 45, and felled by a stroke at 67, the retired Sussex County preschool teacher was not prepared for a diagnosis of breast cancer at the age of 68. Heart disease and cancer run in

her family, but until Kays, no one had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Kays had always been diligent about getting annual mammograms, but in 2012, she delayed her testing for months due to a busy schedule of social and family obligations. After noticing mysterious lumps in one of her breasts, she hurriedly made an appointment for a mammogram. The ultimate diagnosis was Stage Three breast cancer. "Don't wait when a doctor tells you to go get a mammogram," advises Kays. "Don't go next year. Go right away."

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 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.

According to data compiled recently by the Komen for the Cure® North Jersey Affiliate, almost 33% of women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County have not had a mammogram in the past year, a percentage which is marginally better than some of the other counties in the agency's 9-county service area in northern New Jersey. However, 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. The average 5-year mortality rate across all ethnic groups in Sussex County is 33.4%, almost 7 percentage points higher than the 9-county average of 26.5%.

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. 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.

Kays admits that during the weeks and months following her diagnosis, "I was scared to death." She

coped with her fear by leaning on her adult children, husband, parishioners at the First United Methodist Church in Newton, and friends. "I have a good family and good friends. It's very important to talk to other breast cancer survivors. Don't keep it bottle up. I was scared stiff and talking to other people helped me to relax."

Due to the severity of her diagnosis, Kays immediately launched into surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments. "It was quite an ordeal," recalls Kays, who suffered from nausea and a host of other side effects as a result. "But I wouldn't be here if I didn't go through all of that."

Prior to her diagnosis, Kays had retired from her profession as a preschool teacher in order to supervise her five young grandchildren. Despite nagging health problems which are by-products of her cancer treatments, she still finds the energy to watch several of her grandchildren on multiple days each week. "I enjoy it. Being with them helps to take my mind off of my health problems."

Kays has lingering fears about cancer recurring. "I am grateful for every day, but I keep watching and praying and hoping the cancer doesn't develop someplace else. That's my fear." In the meantime, she tries to be supportive of others. She volunteers at her church and speaks with fellow breast cancer survivors whenever possible.

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Friday, November 13th, with funding from the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED) Program. The NJCEED 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.

