

Breast Cancer Survivor Advises Women Not to Wait to Seek Medical Attention



Ten years ago, during a busy time in her life, Beth Meier found a lump in one of her breasts. Distracted by divorce proceedings and international travel for her job, Meier put off seeing a physician about her discovery. Almost a decade later, at the age of 70, Meier broke her arm and finally mentioned the growth to one of the attending physicians while in the emergency room.

She was hospitalized and began a series of tests which eventually determined that she had Stage 4 breast cancer. "I thought that I didn't have the time or the mind-share to deal with it. I was such an idiot," Meier reflects, ashamed that she waited so long to seek help.

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.

According to the New Jersey Department of Health, breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed among New Jersey women and the second leading cause of death, after lung cancer, attributed to cancer in the state. In 2013, more than 7,500 New Jersey women were diagnosed with breast cancer. The rate at which new cases of breast cancer are being diagnosed in Sussex County, as well as in the rest of the state, is stable, according to the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control. The county's breast cancer death rate is also falling, in accordance with state and national trends. However, the disease contributes to the death of 1,300 New Jersey women annually. Access to breast cancer screenings and optimal treatments is an urgent public health issue.

Her breast cancer diagnosis was followed by an injury to her other arm, forcing her to move into a rehabilitation facility for a lengthy period of time. While residing there, she endured multiple bouts with pneumonia, landing her in the hospital. Meier was perilously close to losing her life more than once, forcing her adult daughter to rush to her bedside at the behest of her medical team. She was not well enough to return home for months. Meier believes that the forced withdrawal from her daily routine helped her to focus on herself for the first time in years. "My 'self-work' was in the toilet before that. While I was in the rehab facility, all I had to do was focus on me and rest. It made me really think about why I kept sabotaging myself in so many different ways. I had pushed all of this stuff down for such a long time that when I finally relaxed, all hell broke loose!"

Meier's team of oncologists elected to forgo surgery and chemotherapy in favor of treatment with arimidex and other drugs. Despite the extensiveness of her disease, Meier has demonstrated remarkable improvement over the course her treatment regimen. She is grateful for the support she received during her convalescence. "I am blessed beyond measure to have such a strong church community and for the Sparta Woman's Club. I had hundreds of visitors! God wasn't ready for me, I guess."

Meier winces when she recognizes the stress she caused her family and friends and cautions other women in her situation to take charge of their own health. "It's never too late to get the care you need, and the sooner the better. I kept hoping that somebody else would notice that lump. You must take responsibility for yourself and your care, and think about the people who you are hurting by your inaction."

She is determined to make the most of her second lease on life. "It's easy to have opinions and not act on them. I have always been an active volunteer, but I'm going to be more of an activist than I've ever been. I am also trying to care for myself better, and in the course of doing that, care for others as well."

For the past seven years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered breast health education with the goal of encouraging local women to take a proactive role in monitoring their health. Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign 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.

