

## Breast Cancer Survivor Credits Early Detection for Saving her Life



Antoinette Dickson worked in the field of healthcare for more than 20 years, from doctor's offices to the homes of ill individuals. During that time, Dickson was diligent about staying current with her own healthcare needs, including receiving annual mammograms.

With no family history of breast cancer and no discernible symptoms, Dickson was unconcerned when she was asked to return for additional testing following a routine screening at the age of 67. Further testing, including an MRI, ultrasound, and a biopsy, revealed that she had a small ductal carcinoma, stage one. Determined to be positive, Dickson noted emphatically, "I decided that this could be taken care of because it was so tiny, stage one, and there was no lymph node involvement."

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 4 million breast cancer survivors in the United States. One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet about 85% of these women have no family history of the disease.

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. The disease contributes to the death of 1,200 New Jersey women annually.

In 2021, 8,522 New Jersey women were diagnosed with breast cancer, with the rate highest among Black women, followed by White, Hispanic and Asian. The rate at which new cases of breast cancer are being diagnosed in the state has fluctuated in recent years. According to a recent study by Columbia University, New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut are among the five states with the highest rates of breast cancer among women under the age of 40. Researchers are unsure why the incidence in the Northeastern United States is somewhat higher but speculate that environmental or behavioral factors could play a role. The United States Preventive Services Task Force has recommended screening mammograms every

two years beginning at the age of 40. Consequently, access to breast cancer screenings and optimal treatments is an urgent public health issue.

Dickson's diligence in obtaining annual mammograms over the years paid off. Her breast cancer was detected at such an early stage that she was able to skip chemotherapy and begin receiving aggressive radiation treatments as soon as she recovered from a biopsy of the area. The radiation caused fatigue and skin irritation, but Dickson managed the side effects with relative ease. She credits her longstanding practice of meditative breathing, spiritual music, and daily prayer for her ability to maintain a positive attitude throughout her diagnosis and treatment. "The thing that kept me going was I read Scriptures in the morning, and I listened to praise music in the car. This was something I always did as a home health aide; I always kept myself bathed in prayer to prepare myself before going into a patient's house. Meditative breathing also helped me a lot."

Dickson strongly recommends that women receive annual screening mammograms. "I am most proud of the fact that I kept up my preventive care which allowed the cancer to get caught early. I would rather be uncomfortable for a few minutes during a mammogram than experience what women who have been diagnosed with later stage cancers have to go through. As a healthcare provider, I see how much chemotherapy takes out of people."

### Free Breast Health Services Available

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 who are uninsured or under insured are eligible for the program. For more information, call 1-800-328-3838.

The Sussex County Department of Environmental & Public Health Services offers free screening clinics for women twice a month; screening clinics for men are held several times throughout the year. To determine eligibility and schedule appointments, call 973-579-0570 extensions 1214 or 1246.

The [National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program](#) also provides free and low-cost breast and cervical cancer screenings for income-eligible patients.

