

Local Musician Changes Course after Breast Cancer Diagnosis



Susan Polcer never pictured herself returning to college at the age of 45. She never pictured herself as a breast cancer survivor, either. However, the past 18 months have given Susan many opportunities to reconsider her opinions about a lot of things. Susan is a musician who performs regularly in a local band, Hoi Polloi. The band travels all over the East Coast to perform at events. In between gigs, Susan gives private piano

and voice lessons, serves as the pianist for a local school district and sings in her church choir. She has a busy active life which requires that she be in top physical condition. Consequently, Susan has followed a holistic lifestyle for most of her adult life. When she found a lump in her chest, she initially thought she had pulled a muscle at the gym. With no family history of breast cancer, and a friend who had perished at a young age from breast cancer, Susan had intentionally avoided getting routine mammograms. "I had a friend who passed away at the age of 30 from breast cancer which did not show up on a mammogram," explained Susan, who realizes now that her reasoning was flawed. Susan followed up with her physician and received her first mammogram at the age of 43. The mammogram, along with other diagnostic tests, revealed that Susan had breast cancer. Ironically, the mammogram she had avoided getting ultimately saved her life.

Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2009, 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. 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%.

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.

Because of the havoc wreaked by Hurricane Sandy, Susan had to wait for a prolonged period for the final results of her testing. Her doctor's office was without power for more than a week. "The waiting is the worst. Once you know that you have cancer, you just want to move on with whatever you have to do." When Susan's final diagnosis was received, she was shocked to learn that she had Stage 4 breast cancer, since a spot was detected on her liver as well as within her lymph nodes. Surgical removal of

the tumor and surrounding tissue in her breast, followed by chemotherapy was the recommended course of treatment. Susan pursued a second opinion which confirmed the initial recommendation, so she launched into a total of five chemotherapy sessions. "It was like a smart bomb!" describes Susan. The chemotherapy regimen was followed by 35 treatments with radiation.

During her chemotherapy treatments Susan was a fanatic about following a healthy lifestyle. "I always had a holistic lifestyle, but I definitely got more hard core during that time. I believe that a healthy body will fight disease a lot more effectively than an unhealthy body." Susan researched nutrition extensively, and consumed probiotics, iron, and vitamins C, E and A. She only ate organic foods and avoided hormone-enhanced meats. "As soon as I started taking all of those supplements, my hair stopped falling out," notes Susan who never had to wear a wig or a hat because of hair loss. She never missed a day of work, either. "My job kept me positive. There was no way that I was going to pull the sick card."

Susan is now officially in remission and cancer free. She still maintains her rigid dietary restrictions, however. "So many people I know don't keep up the changes in their lifestyle once the cancer is gone. They don't consider that maybe their lifestyle contributed to them to getting cancer in the first place." Having cancer did change Susan's professional interests. "It's made me realize that there is something out there that is necessary for me to do. I felt like having a new career, so I have gone back to school," notes Susan who already has a Bachelor's degree in Music but is now pursuing an additional degree as a Registered Dietician. "I want to help people to follow the right diet, and help people who are going through chemotherapy and afterwards." She is also a firm advocate for early detection, especially mammograms. "I've been dragging all of my friends to get mammograms. I am a big believer."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, January 30th, from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, 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.

Women who are interested in receiving a free mammogram are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program administered by the Sussex County Health Department. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. 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.

