

Mammogram Obtained on a Whim Detects Breast Cancer



Jacqueline Colaneri did not start out her precious day off from work fourteen years ago with the intention of getting a mammogram. However, her original plans fell through at the last minute, so Jacqueline figured that she might as well get the test out of the way. Good thing she did. The

mammogram revealed a suspicious mass that was later determined to be breast cancer. “I was totally dazed,” recalled Jacqueline recently. “I had no risk factors, no family history, I didn’t smoke, I exercised, and I followed a healthy diet with very little red meat.” Fortunately for Jacqueline, the cancer was diagnosed at a very early stage. “I got the good one,” jokes Jacqueline now. Her diagnosis required two surgical procedures, radiation treatments, and five years of follow-up medication. Jacqueline was a sixth grade teacher in the Sandyston-Walpack school district during that time period. She managed to schedule her surgeries and radiation treatments around the school district’s schedule. “I only missed one day of work.”

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.

During her treatment and recovery from breast cancer, Jacqueline’s son and daughter provided invaluable support. Although Jacqueline’s daughter was away at college, she notes, “We made an agreement that I would always be totally honest with her.” She encouraged her daughter to stay in school and complete her education. Jacqueline’s son, who is younger, was still living at home. “The support he gave me was overwhelming. He was there for me every step of the way, but eventually I let him know that I needed him to be my son, not my caregiver.”

Jacqueline’s co-workers and her friends also stepped up to help during her treatment and recovery, “Their love and acts of kindness, like meals, getting my son to or from after school activities, books on tape for the scary rides to treatments, and even just showing up and saying they were driving me that day lightened my load. Cancer is painful and frightening, but this new awareness of the love that surrounded me made the journey life changing.”

Although Jacqueline’s breast cancer was diagnosed at an early stage, other health complications plagued her during the following years, causing her to undergo a radical hysterectomy some time ago. “I’m an emotional person on a good day, so I had visions of being a raving lunatic,” she says wryly.

Having breast cancer has changed Jacqueline in many ways. Jacqueline retired from teaching after 34 years and is now an independent consultant. She recently remarried. “You are only as good as your last test result, so I live life to the fullest,” she remarks. “I have been blessed with doctors who have surrounded me and grounded me along this treacherous path. Life can change very quickly; it can change with one phone call. I never want to regret something that I did not do.”

Jacqueline continues to support the use of mammograms in detecting breast cancer. “I am such a proponent of mammograms. If my story inspires one person to go get a mammogram, then it was worth it.”

Free mammograms and pap tests are 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 also available. 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.

