

Young Mother of Two Survives Breast Cancer



Loreen Callahan was heaving a large box out of storage when she noticed a peculiar soreness in her breast. She went to the doctor immediately and, after a few tests, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Loreen was only 33 years old. Because of her age, she had never had a mammogram. However, Loreen says that she was not surprised at the diagnosis, because different forms of cancer run in her family and she had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer more than a decade earlier. “When I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer, I thought ‘why me,’” noted Loreen. “When I heard it was breast cancer, I thought, ‘where do we go from here?’”

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.

After her diagnosis, Loreen immediately underwent surgery and began chemotherapy. She made it halfway through her chemotherapy sessions without significant hair loss, but the nausea became overwhelming. A different drug was administered to combat her digestive issues, and as a result, Loreen lost her hair. “That had to be the worst part of it because then people could actually see that you were sick.”

Loreen was fortunate to be surrounded by a loving

family who helped her to care for her two young children, cleaned her house and assisted her with other tasks. Eventually, Loreen was able to return to work as a realtor, but something was different. “Having cancer changes you. I have always tried to help people, but I used to be extremely shy. I tended to take care of others and not take care of myself. Everything happens for a reason. Now I try to volunteer more. If I can help someone, I do. That’s why we are here.” Loreen threw herself into volunteering, and now helps raise funds for various non-profit organizations, and assists with the certified emergency response team in her home town.

Loreen has survived cancer for 17 years now, but she continues to be inquisitive about her own health. Lately Loreen has been participating in a study administered by the Robert Wood Johnson foundation to help determine whether or not there was a link between her two cancer episodes. Unlike her own parents who were terrified of going to the doctor, Loreen has taught her children to be proactive about their health. “I taught my kids preventive medicine and the importance of exercising and eating right. Death is preventable if you catch things early enough. Doctors aren’t Gods. They are like mechanics. They have to figure out what is wrong before they can help you.”

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, October 10th, 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.

