

Childhood Cancer Survivor Stricken with Breast Cancer



Stacy Waskiewicz conquered an adolescent diagnosis of bone cancer with characteristic determination. Despite having a leg amputated because of the disease, Waskiewicz went on to live a productive life for more than 30 years. She received regular physical exams but tossed aside her doctor's annual prescriptions for screening

mammograms. "I put off getting a mammogram, because I didn't realize my risk factors," explains Waskiewicz. "I didn't realize that anybody can get breast cancer."

At the age of 47, Waskiewicz finally made an appointment for her first mammogram. When the radiologist recommended a follow up biopsy, Waskiewicz was stunned. "I was really shocked. This was my first mammogram and I was told that I had breast cancer."

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. 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. In 2014, 7,488 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.

Waskiewicz was ultimately diagnosed with Stage 1A breast cancer. She had a lumpectomy but required no chemotherapy. She is currently in the midst of receiving radiation treatments.

A mother of two young children, Waskiewicz elected to be truthful about her diagnosis with her family. "My children know that I had cancer before and survived it for 30 years, so we had an open discussion. They know that cancer requires treatments and that you must go through them to get better, and sometimes it requires a little bit of extra effort."

As the survivor of a rare form of bone cancer, Waskiewicz was accustomed to turning to the internet for resources and support. She has joined online support groups for breast cancer survivors, as well. "I have a lot of support from the online community of breast cancer survivors. I have also been reading books and educating myself about healthy eating and exercise."

Having breast cancer has spurred Waskiewicz to make some significant changes in her life. "I have changed a lot of things about my lifestyle. I am much more aware of the contributing factors, like stress, diet and exercise. I would encourage women to take care of their stress levels, eat a healthy diet, and focus on self-care. I am so fortunate that I was able to find this breast cancer because of a mammogram. I am not going to let fear hold me back again. Getting a mammogram is not scary and knowledge is not going to hurt you, it's only going to help you."

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 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 973-579-0570, extension 1246 or 1248. 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.

