

## Breast Cancer Survivor Learns from Other Survivors



School nurse Patricia Bloxham started her career at a hospital in Teaneck, transferred to Newton Medical Center when it was just a small building on a hill, and is finishing out her career at the Florence M. Burd Elementary School in Andover. She works alongside breast cancer survivor Lynn Delfing, who was profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign

three years ago. Little did Patricia know that she would soon be following a similar path. Patricia discovered a lump in her breast when she leaned over to clean her bathtub. "This just goes to show you that housework is bad for you!" jokes Patricia. She waited a month and then asked Lynn's advice.

Breast cancer strikes more than 200,000 women each year, and in 2007, 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. 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. In fact, while the mortality rate for breast cancer in the state of New Jersey dropped -8.9% from 1997 to 2005, mortality in Sussex County rose +9.5% during the same period.

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.

Patricia had always received regular mammograms. The lump she detected was found just before she was due for her annual exam. She visited a physician, received a mammogram followed by a biopsy, and learned that she had an aggressive form of cancer. She quickly arranged for a lumpectomy, and began a regimen of chemotherapy followed by radiation treatments. Like her colleague Lynn, she elected to work for two weeks straight, and then took a week off following her chemotherapy treatments in order to rest and recover. Unlike Lynn, Patricia experienced intense abdominal pain following each infusion. Finally, after the third treatment, Patricia sought medical attention for the pain and was startled to learn that she had an abscess on her colon. "I ended up parting with half of my

colon," noted Patricia ruefully. The surgery necessary to clear the intestinal issue interrupted Patricia's chemotherapy regimen and forced her to miss two months of work. Once she healed, the remainder of the chemotherapy was administered without incident.

Patricia thought she was out of the woods once her chemotherapy and radiation treatments were behind her. However, a CAT scan designed to detect the spread of the cancer picked up yet another startling finding; Patricia's aorta was partially blocked, contributing to the nagging back and leg pain which had bothered Patricia for years. Patricia returned to the hospital. "After all the cancer business was done, I had a bypass. Now I am walking long distances and living the good life," declared Patricia. "The cancer was the reason they found that blocked aorta. Ironically, having cancer was almost a good thing."

Her long career in the health care field has given Patricia an appreciation for the progress that has been made in the treatment of cancer. For example, Patricia wholeheartedly endorses mammograms. "Having worked in a hospital, I have seen more than the average person. Years ago, I saw what people went through when they were having chemotherapy, how painful it was and how sick they were. This experience has made me appreciate the strides that have been made through the years."

Patricia credits her family motto with allowing her to take her recent experiences in stride. "We always say, 'don't panic until I tell you to.' So nobody panicked. I just got through it."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Tuesday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 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 at Saint Clare's Hospital in Sussex. 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 the hospital at 973-702-2740. In addition, Newton Memorial Hospital will provide a free mammogram for women who qualify through the Newton Memorial Hospital Foundation's "Mammograms Save Lives" program. Those without health insurance are encouraged to contact Newton Memorial Hospital's Education/Outreach office at 973-579-8340 for more information.

