

Two Sisters Receive Breast Cancer Diagnoses despite Negative Genetic Testing



First-time mother Maureen Snyder was eager to nurse her first child, but after a painful start, she was diagnosed with a blocked milk duct, so she relented and bottle fed her infant daughter instead. When her second child was born, Maureen was determined to breast feed, so she attempted to nurse

and encountered great difficulty once again. She was in pain. Not one to give up easily, Maureen performed a self-exam and found a suspicious mass in her breast. She immediately visited a physician who located two additional lumps. A biopsy confirmed a diagnosis of breast cancer. Maureen was only 31 years old. "I never thought I would have cancer," declared Maureen.

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.

Maureen was aware of a family history of breast cancer, but she erroneously assumed that because the cancer had always occurred within her father's extended family, she was not genetically predisposed to the disease. Ten years after Maureen's positive diagnosis, her older sister, Marie, was also diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 44. Marie assumed that the family history probably posed a threat to her health, so she had been proactive about receiving annual mammograms from an early age. In fact, both sisters requested and received the test for the mutated BRCA gene which has been linked to ovarian and breast cancer, and both sisters tested negative for the gene. They got breast cancer anyway. "Because of my family history, one of my doctors told me that it was not a matter of 'if' I would get breast cancer, it was a matter of 'when,'" noted Marie. "There is obviously a genetic link, but technology has not developed the means to test for it."

Maureen relied heavily on her sister, her family and her friends to help her get through her treatment and recovery. As a stay-at-home mother of two young children, Maureen had her hands full. "It was terrible," recalls Maureen. "My sister is my best friend. She

means the world to me." Ten years later when Marie received her diagnosis, Maureen knew exactly what to do. "I was there for her. I knew what was going to happen and how she was going to feel."

Marie is a lieutenant in the Rockaway Township Police Department. During her treatment and recovery, she made use of her sick days and vacation days and coordinated her chemotherapy and radiation treatments around her work schedule. "Sometimes it was very difficult." Fortunately, at that time she had recently been promoted and was working primarily out of the office. Nevertheless, "Chemotherapy was intense," says Marie. She suffered several health complications as a result of her treatment. During their respective treatments, both sisters became discouraged at times. "I got tired. I was slowly giving up," remembers Maureen. "I made it through thanks to my family and friends. I kept my kids in the front of my head and kept telling myself that I had to be around for them."

"You can go to a deep dark place if your focus is on cancer all the time," agrees Marie. "I would not be here today without the support of my husband, my family and friends. People don't realize what a difference they can make if they just pick up the phone and call and talk about anything other than cancer." Marie vividly recalls the day that her hair began to fall out as a side effect of her chemotherapy regimen. "I was sitting there collecting my hair as it fell out and my husband walked in. It was worse to watch my husband go through this process with me than going through it myself."

After her recovery, Marie and her husband made the decision to forgo starting a family. "I was terrified," noted Marie. She hopes that sharing her story will encourage more women to do self-exams and get a mammogram. "I know how terrified I was when I got cancer. The more open I am about my experience, maybe somebody else will be a little less fearful."

"I recommend mammograms and self-exams, too," adds Maureen. "Talk with your doctor and don't be afraid."

The experience of having cancer has had a lasting impact on both women. Recently, they both participated in a walk to raise funds for breast cancer research. "I live in the moment. I used to plot and plan for the future," muses Marie. "I have a high stress profession. Now I find myself stepping back and taking deep breaths. Cancer readjusts your priorities and reshapes what is important enough to worry about."

Maureen concurs, noting, "Cancer has changed me. I have a different outlook on life now. I sure don't take anything for granted. I went back to work. I continued my education." Maureen was thrilled to give birth to a third child a few years ago.

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.

