

Hospital Administrator's Mission: Defeat Breast Cancer



“You can’t let cancer control you, you must control it,” explains Cindy Allen, as she recounts her march from breast cancer patient at the age of 52 to breast cancer survivor. As a former Captain in the United States Army, Cindy had always approached her health with militaristic precision, receiving an annual mammogram on her birthday and following up with her yearly visit to her physician during the Christmas holiday. With no history of breast cancer in her family, she was not overly concerned about contracting the disease, particularly since she was so proactive about her health. “I worked in hospital administration my entire adult life, and I worked with doctors every day.” She knew the moment that her physician recommended a follow-up ultrasound to her routine mammogram that something was amiss. However, when her diagnosis was Stage 3B Inflammatory Breast Cancer, Cindy was indignant. “That was the first and only day that I cried during the entire treatment. I was so upset. I was furious!” Four years later Cindy has yet to move past the anger. In fact, she believes that her outrage provided the energy to fight what might have been a devastating diagnosis.

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.

Cindy began an odyssey of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments. She believes that her access to physicians gave her an advantage over patients who had not had her professional experience. During her career as a hospital administrator, Cindy had worked in some of the best regional healthcare facilities in the state. “I was one of the lucky ones. I knew how to talk the language of doctors.” She signed up to participate in a clinical trial for a new medication, and she recommends that any patient diagnosed with breast cancer investigate their options for doing so. During her chemotherapy and radiation treatments, she never missed a day of work. She remembers sitting in a staff meeting when a colleague commented that her hair was falling out.

“My husband and I are both ex-military, so we approached this as a military operation. The goal is to defeat breast cancer,” explains Cindy. She relied on support from her family and friends to complete her stated mission, turning her hair loss into a party where both she and her husband got their heads shaved. They even shaved their dog, with the help of a neighbor who grooms pets for a living. “I had a really good support system and I refused to be sad. If you keep positive, keep fighting, and don’t give in, cancer won’t win.”

Four years later, Cindy has been able to watch her children become adults, and is eagerly anticipating the arrival of her first grandchild. She also has significant health issues resulting from the chemotherapy treatments which have forced her into retirement. However, she refuses to be dejected. “I was a director. I had a steel trap brain. I worked 60 hours a week and held a very responsible position. I’m disabled now, but so what? I’m alive! Do I miss working 60 hours a week? Not really! I just have a new normal. My kids are happy and healthy, my husband is okay. That’s what I wanted to be able to see.”

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.

