

A Mother Faces Her Biggest Fear



The start of a new job can often be accompanied by a roller coaster of emotions, from excitement to trepidation. A fear of death is not usually one of them. Christine Reina-Kasko started her new job on a Monday.

On Wednesday, she got a phone call from her doctor who let her know that her recent mammography showed a suspicious growth, and that she needed to come in for more testing. On Thursday, she learned that she had Stage Two breast cancer. On Friday, a day she normally would have been celebrating the completion of her first week at her new job, she was already negotiating a possible leave of absence. Fortunately for Christine, her new employers were flexible, and although she is currently undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatments, she has yet to miss a day of work. At the age of 39, Christine is still under the recommended age for annual mammograms. She also has no family history of the disease. Yet over the years, a nagging voice in her head kept urging her to get periodic mammograms anyway. "If I didn't have one that day, who knows where I would be today?" Christine pointed out recently.

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.

Christine recently lost both of her parents to different types of cancer, and her worst fear is leaving behind her daughter, who is still a toddler. "I have up days and down days, but I try to stay positive and I take one day at

a time." She is also trying to be more mindful about her overall health, monitoring her diet more carefully and squeezing in short walks around her workplace when she is not fatigued.

Her fear has motivated her to spread the word about the importance of mammograms to others, particularly to women under the age of 40 like herself. She read an article in the New Jersey Herald about a breast cancer survivor, and took it upon herself to contact the editor. "I know women who keep putting it off. I even have some family members who are older than I am and never had a mammogram. This made them go out and get one. The local health facilities offering free mammograms are wonderful. However, I think they should offer it to women under 40. I hope my story as well as others will encourage women of all ages to go for routine mammograms."

Christine's extended family has rallied to offer her support during this difficult period of her life, accompanying her to medical appointments, caring for her daughter, helping with meals, and phoning her regularly to check up on her. She is very grateful to her colleagues, who have given her a flexible schedule in order to accommodate her medical needs.

Free mammograms are offered regularly at Project Self-Sufficiency to uninsured and underinsured women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County, 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.

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Thursday, August 2nd, from 10:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED's) program at St. Clare's Hospital in Sussex. 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.

