

Breast Cancer Survivor Endorses 3-D Mammography



If breast cancer survivor Melissa Sacchiero can pass along one lesson to women who are contemplating getting a screening mammogram, she would urge them to insist upon a 3-D mammogram and ultrasound immediately if they are told that they have dense breast tissue. Sacchiero was diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer one year after a regular screening mammogram turned up nothing irregular. At the time, the technician let her know that due to her dense breast tissue, she should have the advanced screening at her check-up done the following year. She is convinced that had she pursued the additional testing her cancer would have been detected at an earlier stage and her treatment options would have been different.

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 2015, 7,584 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.

Following her diagnosis, Sacchiero, 44, was plunged into a whirlwind of surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation treatments that lasted for months. A mother of two, Sacchiero noted that the experience was challenging for her children. "It was incredibly tough on my kids. School was tough, concentrating was tough, and seeing Mom not be herself was tough. But they also saw the other side of it. I showed them that I was never going to give up. I wouldn't let anyone treat me like a patient, not even my doctors."

She insisted on working throughout the ordeal, taking time off from her position as Chief Financial Officer at a Parsippany corporation only when required by her surgeon. "Work was a good distraction for me," explained Sacchiero. "My company was very supportive."

When her hair began to fall out as a result of the chemotherapy, her husband, Todd, offered to give her a haircut and shave her head. "We were laughing, and we were crying," recalls Sacchiero, who credits the support she received from her husband, family, friends and colleagues for helping her to survive. "Having incredibly supportive people around me was what got me through." Sacchiero's family celebrated the completion of her chemotherapy treatments with a party where she was christened, "IronMel" because of her grit. "It was truly unbelievable. Even my doctors came!"

Sacchiero endorses screening mammograms and advanced imaging for women with dense breast tissue. She encourages women to follow up with their doctors, even if they are nervous about the procedure. "The alternative to not getting a mammogram is life-changing and you can never get back that time. Get your mammogram. Breast cancer is curable."

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.

