

Breast Cancer Survivor Urges Women to Advocate for Themselves



Constance Worthington's mother lost a seven-year battle with breast cancer at the age of 55. Taking no chances with her own health, Worthington made sure to make regular visits to a breast specialist in order to be monitored for signs of the disease. She also took extremely good care of herself, exercising regularly and carefully

watching her diet. When a suspicious mass in one of her breasts was labelled a cyst by the breast specialist, Worthington decided to get a second opinion. She was ultimately diagnosed with Stage Two, triple positive breast cancer. She was only 36 years old.

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.

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 2013, more than 7,500 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.

Worthington received a double mastectomy and also had her ovaries removed as a precautionary measure. She was concerned about the reaction of her two young children to her diagnosis, particularly since they had witnessed their grandmother lose her life to breast cancer. She decided to invite her daughter to participate in her treatment and recovery by giving her a haircut. Once Worthington lost her hair, she refused to wear a wig. "I stayed bald. It didn't bother me. I didn't struggle with it. I saw my baldness as a good thing. It was an outward sign that I was getting treatment and doing something to get better."

While she was undergoing treatment, Worthington learned to predict when she was going to have a bad day. At those times, she leaned on her husband as well as her female

friends for support. "Being the support person for a cancer patient is a tough thing and I'm so grateful," remarked Worthington, whose husband accompanied her to all of her appointments. "Men are capable of physically being there, but emotionally, it's often very hard for them. That's why we women tend to lean on our girlfriends during those times when we need emotional support."

She took a leave of absence from her job as a school bus driver in order to recover from her surgeries, but kept on driving while she was undergoing chemotherapy treatments. "In retrospect, I don't understand why I did that!" she marvels. These days, Worthington works as a church secretary, noting, "I'm a very spiritual person. God is my main cheerleader." Since her recovery, she has become more involved with her parish's programs for the homeless and hungry.

Worthington recommends mammograms and urges women to be vigilant in other ways, too. "Everybody has things going on. Be patient with yourself and your body. For some women, patience is something we need to figure out how to do. I was very involved with fitness and nutrition, so doctors would look at me and prescribe anti-depressants when I expressed concern about the cyst in my breast! I want my message to be positive but women must listen to themselves. If you feel that you need to pursue something further, then do it."

For the past seven years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered breast health education with the goal of encouraging local women to take a proactive role in monitoring their health. Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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 973-579-0750, 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.

