

## Local Massage Therapist Survives Breast Cancer, Uses Experience to Help Others



In 2007, Charlene Andrewlavage invited her ten year old son and her husband to shave her head. She watched in the mirror as father and son wielded the clippers and her shoulder-length hair cascaded to the floor. Afterwards, Charlene's husband even took a celebratory photo of the mound of hair before it was swept away. Under normal circumstances, Charlene would not have suggested this unusual haircut. However, a recent diagnosis of breast cancer had caused Charlene to redefine normalcy in her life.

Charlene is a professional massage therapist, currently employed at Ultima Hair Designers Salon & Spa in Andover. Her profession requires that she maintain a certain level of strength and dexterity, so Charlene has always been concerned about her own health. She exercises regularly and maintains a healthy lifestyle. With a family history of breast cancer, Charlene has also been diligent about obtaining annual mammograms. Three years ago, due to unforeseen circumstances, Charlene's annual exam was postponed for several months; when she finally received a mammogram, a virulent form of cancer was detected. Subsequent tests revealed a particularly aggressive and invasive form of breast cancer, which required eight rounds of chemotherapy, followed by daily radiation treatments for more than a month. Unfortunately, the chemotherapy treatments left her weakened and fatigued. She even developed mouth sores from one of the medications. Although she was able to drive herself to her appointments, Charlene reluctantly elected to take a leave of absence from work.

"The effects of the chemotherapy were cumulative and I kept feeling worse and worse," remarked Charlene. "Because of the mouth sores, it was very difficult to swallow. My husband would make me shakes, and mashed potatoes, and other things that were very smooth."

While she was undergoing treatment, Charlene was fortunate to have a strong network of support among her family, friends, colleagues, and parishioners at her church. "My entire family was a tremendous support to me. Even if they couldn't physically be with me, they always called to see how I was doing and find out if I needed anything. Friends, neighbors, co-workers and fellow church parishioners sent beautiful cards, flowers and gifts. Some prepared delicious dinners for us and they all kept us in their prayers. I really felt blessed! I received a beautiful prayer shawl from women in our church. I had compassionate nurses and great doctors."

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.

One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet unlike Charlene, the majority of them have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram. 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. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Charlene often stresses the importance of having a mammogram to those women she knows who are reluctant to get one because of the inconvenience. "A mammogram is uncomfortable for a couple of minutes, but try having chemo for a couple of weeks. I would rather have a mammogram!"

Surviving cancer has had a profound impact on Charlene. After going back to work, Charlene received her certification in a specialized form of massage for patients who have received mastectomies and breast surgeries as a result of cancer. "I always had a desire to nurture and care for others through massage, but now I have more compassion and that desire is even greater," remarks Charlene. "In the last two years I was thrilled to be able to complete a specialized course for those recovering from Mastectomy and Breast Surgeries, which is one way I feel I can give back to others suffering from cancer. Every day is a gift!"

Project Self-Sufficiency, in conjunction with the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®, Intercar Mercedes Benz, Sussex Honda, the New Jersey Herald, and the Sussex County Cancer Coalition have sponsored a campaign, "Mammograms Save Lives," to underscore the importance of annual mammograms to the residents of Sussex County. The effort includes flyers, billboards and newspaper ads, along with a public relations campaign.

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 nine months, more than 100 women have been able to receive a mammogram through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

"In the summer of 2008, I was invited to attend a Casting for Recovery Retreat where I met some wonderful women with breast cancer and we were all treated like queens," Charlene comments, "It was a healing weekend full of fun, camaraderie and tears all while learning the sport of fly-fishing! So many people were so nice to us, it really gives you hope and it's a great feeling to know that there are many special people in this world. Breast cancer is not a death sentence. You survive."

Free mammograms are offered frequently to uninsured and underinsured women over the age of 40 at Project Self-Sufficiency. The next available date for a free mammogram is Thursday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. 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.

