

Demand for Mammogram Saves Woman's Life



At the age of 37, Kay Di Marzo was busy parenting four young children. She was fit and had no family history of breast cancer, but she felt an overwhelming urge to get a baseline mammogram anyway. She made an appointment with her gynecologist and requested the test. The doctor

refused, citing Kay's age, good health and the lack of a family history of breast cancer. Kay persisted, and finally a prescription was written. Kay got a mammogram and a questionable mass was detected. At her physician's suggestion, Kay waited 6 months and had a second test. This time, the mass was larger. A biopsy determined that she had Stage One breast cancer. "I went through 10 minutes of pure hell," noted Kay wryly. Then she shook it off and scheduled a lumpectomy.

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.

Kay's persistence resulted in a diagnosis of breast cancer that was at such an early stage chemotherapy was

not warranted. Instead, she received radiation treatments 5 days a week for 10 weeks. "I prevented myself from getting worse by insisting that I wanted a mammogram," comments Kay. She had virtually no side effects from her treatments and was able to carry on with her busy life.

Eleven years later, Kay was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Once again she had surgery and was treated with radiation. Although Kay insists that her reaction to both diagnoses of cancer was nonchalance, she admits that the experience has changed her life. "It was a bump in my life, that's what I tell people. Having cancer has made me a positive person. Nothing bothers me anymore. I'm happy all the time, and it drives people nuts! That's just the way I live my life." Kay notes that having cancer has also demonstrated to her children that the disease can be survived. "Cancer is not a death sentence."

Kay is a strong advocate for mammograms. "I tell everybody to go get a mammogram. It's really not that big of a deal. Just do it! It prevents so much. Better to get it over and done with, because it could get so much worse."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, September 12th, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, 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.

Women who are interested in receiving a free mammogram are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms and pap tests are also 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 available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. Interested participants are encouraged to call 973-579-0750, ext. 1246. 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.

