

A Friendly Taunt Saved Her Life



As of September, 2007, Beth Nathans had not had an annual physical or a mammogram in eleven years. Like many women, Beth claimed that she did not like going to the doctor or taking medicine. Although she had avoided her annual physical for years, she was in relatively good health. Beth is the Director of Women's Programs at Sunrise House in Lafayette, a facility for

patients recovering from alcohol and drug abuse. As a certified social worker, Beth spends a large part of her day with women who have not taken good care of themselves over the years. So on that fateful day in September, Beth was trying to convince a group of Sunrise House residents to take advantage of the free mammogram program offered at Project Self-Sufficiency. One of the residents taunted Beth, saying, "If you get one, I'll get one." Ironically, these words may have saved Beth Nathans life. When the x-ray technician at Project Self-Sufficiency learned of the length of time since Beth's last exam, she whisked Beth away and gave her a mammogram. To Beth's shock, Stage Three breast cancer was detected. "I never expected anything to show up. I wasn't feeling sick. I checked my own breasts regularly and I was healthy."

Like most patients who develop breast cancer, Beth had no history of the disease in her family. One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet the majority of them have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram.

Beth's cancer was so unique that the first surgeon she consulted could not even detect it during her exam. A second surgeon sent Beth for a biopsy, followed by surgery. Beth's treatment included six months of chemotherapy, followed by two months of radiation treatments, and a year-long preventative course of Herceptin. The rigorous chemotherapy resulted in Beth losing her hair, but not her sense of humor. "I lost all my hair and that was very traumatic, but it grew back," remarked Beth.

Despite her treatments, Beth continued to work at Sunrise House throughout her diagnosis and recovery. "Being able to work really helped me. My colleagues were very supportive. My diagnosis was an eye-opener for the people I work with. They realized that they had better go get check-ups, too."

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. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Beth's experience with breast cancer has forced her to make her own health a priority. "Stage Three Cancer is very aggressive, so right after my diagnosis, I tried to read everything I could about breast cancer. But after awhile, I just had to let go. I had to decide that today is what counts, do what the doctors say and just live my life. Now I go for regular check-ups. I exercise more. I lost some weight. I'm trying to take better care of myself. I'm just really glad that Project Self-Sufficiency has that program and that I was able to get a mammogram."

Three years later, Beth has completely recovered, although she still occasionally struggles with the lingering impact of the side effect known as chemo brain. "I used to be very good with names. Now I see these faces and I sometimes have difficulty remembering their names."

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.

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.

"I want to give people hope," remarked Beth recently. "Breast cancer is a disease that you can do something about. It's an illness like any other illness and you can survive it. You just have to have hope."

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 7th, 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 for more information.

