

## Local Artist Discusses her Brush with Breast Cancer



With her breast cancer diagnosis a distant memory, local artist Debora Meltz has a difficult time referring to herself as a survivor. "I didn't really survive anything," Meltz says nonchalantly, referring to her breast cancer diagnosis more than twenty years ago. "It was just a brush with cancer. It was not a traumatic experience." Being diligent about her

health, Meltz began obtaining annual screening mammograms in her 40's. Three weeks after her regular mammogram at the age of 48, she discovered a lump in one of her breasts. The lump had grown so quickly that it had also been missed by her physician at an annual exam two weeks earlier. Follow up testing revealed a malignant tumor.

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 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 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%.

Once the tumor had been removed, Meltz elected to skip additional surgery and chemotherapy; instead, she received radiation treatments for seven weeks. "You really need to get all the information, listen to it very carefully and then make your own decision," advises Meltz. "Women need to be less terrified. Not everyone needs chemotherapy. It's an individual decision." Meltz had few physical reactions to the radiation treatments. "The after effects of radiation are not pleasant, but they are not painful," adds Meltz. She considers herself very fortunate. "For me, it was a cakewalk."

A mother of two teenagers at the time, Meltz was so confident in her ability to deal with her diagnosis, that she never informed her own mother and only told her children about her situation years later. "There was nothing to tell

them because there were no decisions to be made that would involve them. I knew it wasn't life threatening."

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 practice effective early detection techniques, such as annual mammograms and self-exams. 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.

All these years later, Meltz continues to be vigilant about her health. "I am cognizant of the fact that I had it once and I could have it again. I do take care of myself. For years afterwards, you have the feeling that your fortress has been breached. You are no longer invincible, so any time you feel a little twitch or twinge, you think that the cancer is back. I was only 48, but it did make me think about my own mortality for the first time and it scared me. That abated with time. The fear does go away."

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.

Project Self-Sufficiency is currently searching for Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign. Their story would appear in the *New Jersey Herald* and on the Project Self-Sufficiency website. Interested participants are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

