

Mother & Daughter Share Breast Cancer Diagnosis



At the age of 87, Ann Ritzer decided to stop getting annual mammograms. With no family history and no personal experience with the disease, she and her primary care physician felt that the test was no longer necessary at her advanced age. Two years later, Ritzer's daughter Lisa Lurz, 55, was diagnosed with Stage One breast cancer. Lurz encouraged her mother to get a mammogram as a precaution. "As a result of being so scared about Lisa, I went to get a mammogram," explains Ritzer. A suspicious mass was found by the screening, ultimately leading to a diagnosis of Stage One breast cancer. Both mother and daughter embarked on a journey of healing together.

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. One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet about 85% of these women have no family history of the disease.

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 2015, 7,584 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.

With dense breasts, Lurz had a history of being asked to return for multiple views following her annual mammography screenings. None of the follow up tests had ever shown any cause for concern, so when her physician told her that a biopsy was warranted, Lurz was frightened. "I was scared. I had thought it would be just like all of the other times they called me in." After the biopsy confirmed the presence of cancer, Lurz

had to wait two weeks to see a surgeon. "That was an awful time, because I didn't know what stage it was," recalls Lurz. After meeting with their respective surgeons, both women were prescribed a lumpectomy followed by 21 radiation treatments. They were both able to avoid chemotherapy because their cancer was caught at such an early stage.

Lurz waited until after her biopsy to share the news of her diagnosis with her three adult sons. Her children and her husband offered their unflagging support throughout her treatment and recovery. "It wasn't an option that I would not be okay."

Lurz is a busy fifth grade teacher in a local elementary school. Except for the surgery, she refused to take time off from work, and headed for her radiation treatments as soon as the bell rang each afternoon. Aside from the discomfort, Ritzer experienced no discernible side effects from the radiation, while Lurz was exhausted. "I was exhausted for two months afterwards, too," noted Lurz, who attributes her reaction to her full workload.

Lurz was reluctant to share the news about her diagnosis at work, but ultimately did so in order to explain her need to leave the school grounds immediately after school each day. She was rewarded with a barrage of gifts, advice and attention from her fellow employees. "That really touched me. I was surprised by how many people reached out." Her colleagues now check in with her whenever they get a mammogram.

At the one-year anniversary of their diagnoses, both Ritzer and Lurz approached their annual mammograms with trepidation. "That was the scariest thing about the whole process for me because you're not naïve anymore," noted Lurz.

Ritzer adds, "So many people have been touched by cancer, but I thought at my age I was home free. I felt like I had joined a sorority! It was unbelievable. It has certainly been a sharing experience with my daughter."

Free Breast Health Services Available

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 973-579-0570, extension 1246 or 1248. 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.

