

Cancer Diagnosis Leads Survivor to Take Time for Herself



Cyndy Ponczek did all the right things. She was careful about her diet and she exercised regularly. She maintained an active lifestyle with her family. As a precaution, she began getting annual mammograms at a young age, because her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 51. Cyndy even got two blood tests specifically designed to detect genetic predisposition to breast cancer, both of which came back negative. At the age of 48 she got breast cancer anyway. Fortunately for Cyndy, the cancer was detected at a very early stage by her annual mammogram.

Breast cancer strikes more than 200,000 women each year, and in 2007, 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. 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. 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.

Cyndy endured multiple surgeries, but did not have to suffer through chemotherapy or radiation treatments, because her breast cancer was detected at such an early stage. However, the pain following her surgery, coupled with the two-year regimen of tamoxifen, a drug commonly used to prevent the recurrence of breast cancer, was debilitating. "I was perimenopausal at the time, and the tamoxifen threw me into menopause. I was not prepared because I still felt young at the time. It caught me off guard. The hot flashes were unbearable

and the mood swings were horrible." She stayed on the medication for two years. "For me the quality of life was horrible, so I chose to address it with diet and exercise instead." Cyndy took up running and kickboxing, and she explored her creative side by scrapbooking and stamping. "I used to live my life for my family and now I do it for me."

She also joined a support group for breast cancer survivors, most of who were also diagnosed at a young age. She is outraged by the Surgeon General's recent suggestion that women wait until the age of 50 to start receiving annual mammograms. "My cancer would have been growing inside of me for two years if it wasn't for that mammogram," noted Cyndy. "Mammograms are a life-saving tool. I really believe that mammograms and self-exams are so important. As a women, your body changes every day. You need to know what your own body feels like. You might detect something that a mammogram does not."

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 few years, hundreds of women have received free mammograms through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Thursday, October 11th, 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. Free mammograms are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED's) program at St. Clare's Hospital in Sussex. Interested participants are encouraged to call the hospital at 973-702-2740. 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.

