

Sense of Humor Sustains Breast Cancer Survivor



A family history of breast cancer led Sussex County resident Alex Zander to be attentive to her health care from an early age. She began receiving screening mammograms in her 30's and had become accustomed to receiving follow up testing of benign growths beginning in her 40's. When an unusual growth was found by her annual mammogram at the age of 67,

Alex was not surprised. Further testing revealed that Zander had Stage Two breast cancer. "I just knew it would show up one day," remarked Zander about her breast cancer diagnosis. "It was never a question of 'if', it was a question of 'when.'"

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. However, according to a comprehensive compiled from 2006 - 2010 by the Komen North Jersey Affiliate among women in the agency's nine-county area, women in Sussex County, New Jersey, have fewer breast health screenings than women in the remaining eight counties, due to a limited understanding of breast health.

The Susan G. Komen North Jersey Affiliate, the local arm of the national organization, covers nine counties in northern New Jersey, including Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren. During 2006 - 2010, breast health screenings among Sussex County women was markedly lower at 71% versus a 79% rate of screenings in the remainder of the coverage area. The late stage diagnosis of breast cancer in Sussex County hovered at 52.8% while other counties in Komen North Jersey service area tallied a 46.1% late stage incidence of breast cancer. In addition, the county had an astounding rate of 29.5% breast cancer-related deaths per 100,000 people during the four-year period. By comparison, other counties in the agency's nine county service area had a much lower rate of 24.7%.

Education about breast health is one of the keys to turning around these trends in Sussex County. For the past five years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered free mammograms to area women via a mobile mammography unit several times a year.

Zander employed humor throughout her odyssey of surgery, treatment and recovery in order to help her cope. "I was never terrified or upset. A good sense of humor can get you through things. I would find funny and uplifting things about it all. Being able to laugh things off is a saving grace." When her breast surgeon notified her that a long-desired breast reduction could now be obtained as part of her surgical experience, Zander turned to her husband of 38 years, and crowed, "I can get a breast reduction for free!" Her husband, Bill, also a cancer survivor, responded dryly, "You do realize that you have cancer, don't you?"

Zander powered through her chemotherapy treatments and subsequent radiation sessions by scheduling them around her commitments in church and family obligations. "The things I cared about and invested my life in I never missed because I didn't feel that bad."

Despite undergoing chemotherapy during the winter months, Zander refused to wear a wig or even a scarf once she began to lose her hair. In a frank conversation with her young grandson about her disease, he queried, "When was the last chance you had to be bald?" She immediately grasped the significance of the situation and embraced it. As a result, strangers approached her constantly to express their support of her predicament. "A lot of things about this experience were positive. Women came up to me in the supermarket and gave me hugs!"

After her many experiences with the accuracy of mammography screenings in dealing with her breast health issues, Zander has no patience for women who refuse to take charge of their health and obtain screening mammograms, particularly if fear of a positive diagnosis is their rationale. "The reason I went bald is to show people that bald is better than death. It is so much better than lying in a casket with a head full of hair!"

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Thursday, January 26th, from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Some insurance plans will be accepted; those without insurance, or those who are underinsured, are welcome to participate. Mammograms will be available by appointment to women over the age of 40; some income-eligibility guidelines apply. To make an appointment for a free mammogram at Project Self-Sufficiency, interested women are invited to call 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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 local newspapers and on the Project Self-Sufficiency website. Interested participants are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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.

