

Breast Cancer Survivor Emphasizes the Importance of Trust in Recovery



Four-time breast cancer survivor Anne Wheeler does not mince words when it comes to discussing her health. “You have to truly trust your doctor. If you don’t feel confident, get out of there, because that is the practice that is going to keep you alive.” Wheeler has lived with recurring breast cancer diagnoses for over 28 years, having received a positive diagnosis when she was just 40 years of age. The ability to live a long

and productive life following a breast cancer diagnosis appears to run in Wheeler’s family; her grandmother was also diagnosed at the age of 40 and survived for 50 years.

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.

As a European expatriate who had recently relocated to New Jersey, Wheeler was relatively unfamiliar with the health care system when she noticed an irregularity in one of her breasts. She marched to her physician for an examination. Wheeler was appalled when her doctor turned to her husband and recommended a double mastectomy based on the results of her biopsy. Instead of complying, Wheeler insisted on a second opinion.

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%.

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. 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.

Following her first diagnosis, Wheeler underwent a lumpectomy followed by radiation. She took disability leave from her job as a recruiter for a local employment agency, and relied on support from her husband and daughter to help her during her recovery. “I never went to a support group, although it’s nice to know that they are there if you need them. I have my family and I didn’t feel that I needed anything else.”

The cancer eventually recurred, forcing Wheeler to have more

surgery. This time she received chemotherapy treatments, as well. She steadfastly refused to wear wig and insisted on maintaining a positive outlook. “I try to be as upbeat as I can. You can’t just sit there in doom and gloom!”

Wheeler’s third diagnosis came as a result of a blood test. She had the infected breast removed and received more chemotherapy. This time she sported a variety of wigs. “I had fun because you can buy something that doesn’t look like you.” As she had during her second round of treatments, Wheeler continued to work, scheduling her chemotherapy treatments to allow her to recover over the weekends. Maintaining a positive outlook was crucial. “Cancer is a physical condition, but there’s an awful lot that’s in your mind. You’ve got to have a positive attitude.”

When the cancer returned for the fourth time, Wheeler learned that she had a tumor in her abdomen the size of a small melon. She underwent surgery again, “I had everything taken out that didn’t matter!” she chortles. Once again she relied on her family for support. “You can’t get through something like this without somebody else there.” Despite being diagnosed with cancer on four separate occasions, Wheeler notes, “I was lucky. Each time it came back, you hear a voice in your head, saying ‘Oh, dear.’ Then you just say ‘We’ve got to get on with it now.’ I’ve been through it before. I’m going to get through it this time, too.”

Sharing her story was important for Wheeler, who wants others to know that there is the possibility for a full life following a cancer diagnosis. “I suppose you could say that this experience gives you a better feeling about life, but I had that anyway. I have always been a ‘glass half full’ type of person. For me, when I have a birthday, I celebrate because I got another one in!”

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Friday, November 13th, with funding from the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED) Program. The NJCEED 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.

