

## **Nursing Professional Uses her Golden Years to Help Others**



Betty Pluymers spent many years caring for her ailing husband. As a nurse, she was uniquely qualified for the job, and she has no regrets about the years that faded away during his long illness. After his death in 2003, Betty planned to take it easy and enjoy her golden

years. However, a routine mammogram at the age of 72 changed her plans. Betty was diagnosed with Stage One breast cancer. Instead of relaxing, Betty dove into surgery, radiation treatments and follow up procedures with the vigor of someone half her age. Today, she credits her illness with allowing her to become an activist for health in her community.

“I cried for about a minute,” remarked Betty, when she learned of her diagnosis. “I think when you get older, you expect a heart attack or something like that. There was no breast cancer in my family at all, so I never thought of it.”

One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet the majority of them 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.

As a Registered Nurse, Betty had always been proactive about taking care of her own health. She had yearly physicals, received annual flu shots, visited her gynecologist, and conducted self-exams as well. “You have to take care of yourself. You have to be active in your own health care. You owe it to your family,” noted Betty, whose growing brood includes one son, three granddaughters, and one great-grandson.

Project Self-Sufficiency, in conjunction with the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®, Intercar Mercedes Benz, Sussex Honda, the New Jersey Herald, and the Sussex County Cancer Coalition have sponsored a campaign, “Mammograms Save Lives,” to underscore the importance of annual mammograms to the residents of Sussex County. The effort includes flyers, billboards and newspaper ads, along with a public relations campaign.

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.

“I definitely recommend getting a mammogram,” added Betty, who is active in the Congregational Health Ministry at her church. “I tell men and women to get check-ups.” Since her diagnosis, Betty has become involved in the Sussex County Cancer Coalition, and has volunteered to assist at Project Self-Sufficiency with the agency’s Breast Health Awareness Program. “It’s hard, but even if you are uninsured or underinsured, there are places out there where you can get a mammogram.”

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Thursday, October 6<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 a.m. – 5:30 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.

