

Breast Cancer Survivor Urges Women to Get Mammograms



Despite being diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago at the age of 57, Deb Green considers herself fortunate. “I was lucky because it was caught extremely early,” explains Deb. A routine mammogram spotted a suspicious mass which a follow-up biopsy revealed was actually cancerous breast tissue. To Deb’s

relief, surgery was scheduled within weeks. However, her treatment and recovery were slightly complicated by the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Deb was forced to recover from surgery in a hotel, since her Hopatcong home was without power for two weeks. Because the routine mammogram detected her cancer at such an early stage, Deb was not required to undergo chemotherapy treatment. Still, Deb notes that the 32 radiation treatments she received “were not fun.” Her hair thinned, she was extremely fatigued, and she experienced burns from the radiation. She turned to her family for support, and she now claims that her husband, Rich, to whom she has been married for 30 years, “was the best spouse ever.”

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.

Deb continued working as an administrative assistant in the pharmacy at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Wayne throughout her diagnosis, treatment and recovery. “I continued to work because I felt that if I went to work, it would keep my mind off of the fact that I had cancer,” recalls Deb. However, her regimen was exhausting. Her typical work day entails supporting several pharmacists by completing clerical tasks, making numerous phone calls, interfacing with colleagues, and performing other administrative functions which require that she stay focused and energetic. “I would get a radiation treatment every day at 6:30 in the morning, and then work from 7:00 in the morning until 3:30,” she explains. At the insistence of her husband, she would rest in the afternoon and evening. Since her diagnosis, her compromised immune system has proven to be a challenge in a hospital environment. “I must be very vigilant about washing my hands. I’ve already had two MRSA infections,” notes Deb, who has even figured out how to punch the hospital’s elevator buttons with her elbows to avoid contracting infections.

Deb is so frustrated by women who avoid getting a screening mammogram, that she contacted Project Self-

Sufficiency to help spread the word about the importance of an early diagnosis in the cure for breast cancer. “I welcome the chance to tell more women ‘please don’t wait, get a mammogram now.’ This the voice of experience talking to you. Don’t be foolish. It’s uncomfortable to get a mammogram, but that little bit of discomfort is nothing compared to the pain of a lumpectomy, radiation or chemotherapy. The longer you wait, the greater the chance of a worse diagnosis.”

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.

Deb notes that having cancer has changed her outlook on life. “I used to let little things really bother me. I was a perfectionist about my family and my house. I’m different now. Now, I end the day by being grateful that I made it through another day. I definitely take each day as it comes.”

Free mammograms and pap tests are available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program administered by the Sussex County Health Department. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are also available. 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.

