

## Local Woman Does Not Allow Breast Cancer Diagnosis to Stop Her from Helping Others



When she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 62, Debbie Papanestor had only one question for the physician who had gently broken the news to her. "What do we have to do? I don't have time for this!" Papanestor, a full-time employee of a medical billing and collection agency is also a

passionate volunteer for Connect for Community, a local non-profit organization which collects backpacks, school supplies and personal hygiene products for low-income families in New Jersey. Although she regularly hits the gym to work out and follows a healthy diet, Papanestor had missed her annual mammograms for several years in a row. "I had not had a mammogram in a couple of years because my doctor retired," she explains. Papanestor was not completely surprised by her diagnosis because she had noticed a dimpling on one of her breasts prior to her screening mammogram, "I had a lot of fibrous cysts over the years, but I had a feeling that this time it was different."

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.

According to the New Jersey Department of Health, breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed among New Jersey women and the second leading cause of death, after lung cancer, attributed to cancer in the state. In 2013, more than 7,500 New Jersey women were diagnosed with breast cancer. The rate at which new cases of breast cancer are being diagnosed in Sussex County, as well as in the rest of the state, is stable, according to the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control. The county's breast cancer death rate is also falling, in accordance with state and national trends. However, the disease contributes to the death of 1,300 New Jersey women annually. Access to breast cancer screenings and optimal treatments is an urgent public health issue.

Within a short period of time, Papanestor endured surgery, six rounds of chemotherapy and 32 radiation treatments. Physically, she responded so well to the overall experience that she jokes, "I had to keep asking my doctors, 'Are you sure you're giving me drugs?'" Many of her acquaintances and colleagues were unaware that Papanestor was undergoing treatment for cancer because she did not appear to be ill. "My body was able to handle it with minimal side effects," she explains. "I had to remind myself to slow down."

Papanestor's good health and tolerance of the medication allowed her to stay at work and continue her volunteer efforts. "Helping others took the focus off of me."

The regimen took a toll on Papanestor emotionally, however, particularly when she lost her hair as a side effect of the chemotherapy. "I had always had thick, coarse hair. My hair

defined me and all of a sudden, it was gone. It made me ask 'Now who am I?'"

She counts herself fortunate to have had overwhelming support from her husband, son, extended family, friends and colleagues. "It was more than I ever expected," she states, pointing out that her husband was by her side from the initial diagnosis through every chemotherapy treatment and physician's appointment. She admits that participating in some of the outdoor activities she had always enjoyed with her husband were difficult while undergoing treatment for cancer. The couple participates in Spartan races, a unique type of marathon which features obstacles throughout the course. "Last year at this time, it was hard for me to walk up a hill. Things I used to do with ease became a challenge," she recalls. This summer, Papanestor managed to complete the Spartan race with the assistance of her husband and friends who pushed and pulled her over walls and obstacles in order to help her cross the finish line.

Papanestor is starting to embrace the notion of being a cancer survivor. "It puts you into a whole different class emotionally and spiritually. I try to be more patient and not let little things bother me. My faith has gotten stronger and I am trying to be a better Christian. You find out what a blessing your life is."

She advises others in her position, "Get healthy so that you can do more. Don't waste your life because you are afraid of a test. We're fearful of the 'what if's'. I am the 'what if' and I beat it!"

### Breast Cancer Survivors Sought for Public Relations Campaign

For the past seven years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered breast health education with the goal of encouraging local women to take a proactive role in monitoring their health. Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

### Free Mammograms Available

Project Self-Sufficiency will offer free mammograms by appointment to uninsured and underinsured women over the age of 40 as part of the agency's annual Health Fair on Thursday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>. Interested women are invited to call 973-940-3500 to schedule an appointment.

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.

