

Local Woman Conquers Breast Cancer



At the age of 51, Donna Snyder had been married for more than 25 years, had successfully shepherded two sons into adulthood, and had enjoyed a long career as a school business administrator. However, one summer, within the span of several months, Donna's world unraveled. Donna and her physicians had been monitoring a set of calcifications on one of her breasts for more than a year. Periodic mammograms demonstrated that her condition was stable, according to her radiologist. Then, in July of 2007, Donna found a lump. "I knew right away. As soon as I felt it, I just knew it was cancer." Donna immediately met with her physician who ordered an MRI. The day after her test, Donna left for vacation. "I knew it would be rough road," she noted recently. Upon her return, Donna was diagnosed with three different forms of breast cancer. Shortly thereafter, her husband filed for divorce and her son was deployed. "Getting cancer was a challenge. Getting cancer and going through all of that was a challenge and a half," noted Donna wryly.

Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2009, the year that the most recent statistics are available, more than 40,000 women died as a result. Breast cancer is often a silent disease, with virtually no symptoms, but it is often completely curable if diagnosed in its early stages. 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. 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%.

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.

Throughout the following year, Donna relied on her family, her friends and her colleagues for support. When her hair began falling out as a result of her chemotherapy treatments, her sons playfully shaved her head and gave her a Mohawk. Her mother made her scarves to match her collection of hats. Her friends brought her home-cooked meals and sent get-well cards. Her sister, who lives nearby, forced her out of the house and made her take a walk almost every day. Her co-workers kept the office going in her absence. Donna stayed

home for four months, but ended up returning to work while she was undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatments. She tried to be upbeat in order to make it through the process. "I had to feel that things were funny and keep a positive attitude. I listened to a lot of positive imagery CD's. I even painted smiley faces on my toenails in hot pink each time I had surgery."

Now that she has passed the five year survival mark, Donna has recently been allowed to stop taking tamoxifen, a drug which prevents the growth of breast cancer cells and which is often recommended to women who are in recovery. The experience of being in remission is an unexpected challenge, explained Donna recently. "It is amazingly difficult. There is this period where you have to fight to live, and then you realize that you are going to live, and then you have to do that, too. There are many periods of transition."

Donna feels strongly that had her cancer been diagnosed after her first questionable mammogram, her experience would have been vastly different. "Go for your mammogram, but if you don't feel comfortable with what you are hearing, and part of you is telling you that something is not right, get a second opinion. I was too busy with my life to pay attention. If I had done that, my outcome would have been much less invasive. I tried to be the perfect mother, the perfect wife and the perfect employee. I am trying to take care of myself now. It's very common for women to put themselves last, and we need to do a better job of taking care of ourselves. You always have a choice. It's your body and you get to choose what to do with it. Once you remember that, you start to feel some control over the little things."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, October 10th, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, 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.

Women who are interested in receiving a free mammogram are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms and pap tests are also 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 available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. 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.

