

Breast Cancer Survivor Considers Herself Fortunate



Gail Bibik noticed a mysterious lump beneath her breast while applying sunscreen one sunny day in May. Even though she was on vacation at the time, Gail promptly called her physician to schedule a visit. Gail had always been proactive about her health, even receiving a screening mammogram at the age of

35, just because her insurance plan allowed it. A mammogram and follow up ultrasound confirmed that Gail had breast cancer. With no family history of the disease, Gail noted, "It was a surprise. It knocks you off your feet when you hear that 'C' word." Gail was only 39 years old.

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.

Nineteen years later, Gail considers herself fortunate. Having made the decision to undergo a complete mastectomy following her diagnosis, Gail never had to endure chemotherapy or radiation treatments. The decision was not a difficult one for Gail, who was concerned about the cancer eventually spreading to her other breast. "For me the best option was to remove both breasts, or I would have driven myself berserk!" Gail was completely honest about her situation with her son and daughter who were 13 and 11 years old at the time. Her husband was extremely supportive and even assisted her with post-surgical tasks during her recovery. "I'm very fortunate. I did not spend any time saying, 'Oh, poor me,'" recalls Gail now. "I caught it early, I did what I had to do, and I'm good. It is what it is." Following her recovery, Gail was so positive that she had made the right choice she even volunteered to spend time reassuring other women who were confronting similar diagnoses.

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.

These days, Gail spends time caring for her grandchildren when she is not pursuing activities in the community. The experience of having cancer has had a long-lasting impact. "I think you learn not to sweat the small stuff. So many things that we worry about are really meaningless," commented Gail. "It has given me more of a spiritual outlook, as well."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 at Project Self-Sufficiency on Thursday, March 26th, as part of the agency's Community Health Fair. Interested recipients are invited to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 to schedule 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 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.

