

Sussex County Breast Cancer Survivor Inspires Others



It is rarely a good thing when breast cancer can be considered a family affair, but in the case of breast cancer survivor Heidi Delahanty, her diagnosis galvanized her entire family. Although Heidi is the only person in her family who has had breast cancer, both Heidi's 14-year-old daughter and Heidi's mother have become trail blazers in Sussex County. Heidi's mother, Elaine Ferfero, now serves as the President

of the Sparta Chapter of the Newton Medical Center Auxiliary, and she can be found regularly distributing lunch to patients at the Sparta Cancer Center. Heidi's daughter, McKenzie, has raised funds for breast cancer research and prevention efforts by organizing a variety of events, from creating teams to participate in fundraising walks to hosting pony tail donation parties to benefit the non-profit organization Locks of Love.

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.

Heidi was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer at the age of 37. Her odyssey of treatment and recovery took more than two years, due to numerous health complications. During that period, Heidi relied heavily on her husband, Shawn, as well as family and friends for support as she struggled to care for her young children, who were 6 and 8 years of age at the time she was diagnosed. Neighbors created a weekly calendar for the delivery of home-cooked meals, and Heidi's parents stepped in to assist with transporting her children to activities.

Heidi and Shawn co-own Delahanty Construction, LLC, a construction business which specializes in renovation projects. Heidi serves as the interior designer, while her husband handles the construction portion of the business. Heidi also works as a real estate agent. "When I was first diagnosed, I thought, 'No

way! I'm 37 years old, I have very young children, and I'm working a full-time job.' It was a very, very long healing road. Just trying to do the day-to-day stuff with the kids was difficult."

Heidi's extensive health problems forced her to stop working entirely, which placed an additional burden on her husband, who had to shoulder more of the work within their business while taking over additional duties on the home front. "My husband was wonderful. He was the Mom and the Dad." However, their financial situation worsened as a result. "It was hard because a lot of the time he couldn't work," commented Heidi. "We are self-employed. I had high deductibles and high co-pays. It was brutal. We incurred a lot of financial burden from it."

Heidi volunteered to participate in a clinical trial during her treatment, and she stresses the importance of patients' willingness to participate in order to enhance treatment options for future patients. "The one nice thing about my treatment was that I was part of a clinical study that has now become a standard form of practice. If people don't step up to participate in these studies, we don't give physicians the option for new forms of treatment." However, her participation required stringent adherence to protocol, including additional surgery, so her recovery was prolonged even more.

Heidi will be the featured speaker at Project Self-Sufficiency's Breast Cancer Survivor Celebration on May 31st. The celebration will feature a catered luncheon, health and wellness workshops, yoga, massage, music and other activities. Heidi plans on speaking about her journey to recovery, acknowledging the support she received from her friends and family, and explaining how the experience has changed her. "I live my life differently now. I live my life for the moment. Each day is a blessing. I have a much greater level of empathy for people who are going through an illness, because I can appreciate and understand how hard it really is."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, May 29th, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, thanks to the support of the Newton Medical Center Foundation. 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.

