

Cancer Survivor Marks One-Year Anniversary



Jean Marie Day says pointedly, “I am not a rule breaker. I always get check-ups, go to the dentist and get mammograms.” With no family history of breast cancer and no discernible health issues, Day, 53, approached her annual mammogram in 2015 without trepidation. However, the scan revealed a malignancy which required further examination. After undergoing a biopsy,

Day learned that she had Stage One breast cancer. She notes ruefully, “I am the poster child for Mammograms Save Lives.” She adds reluctantly, “My motto has always been ‘Life’s a Journey.’ This is not quite the one I wanted!”

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.

In fact, 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 practice effective early detection techniques, such as annual mammograms and self-exams. 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.

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%.

Day immediately embarked on an odyssey of surgery and chemotherapy, “I wanted to rail road through it, but it’s really hard. There were some days when it kicked me in the butt. You want to get up the couch and do things, but your body tells you that you can’t.” Day noted that her knowledge about the side effects of chemotherapy treatments was not very extensive prior to her own experience. “I thought you lost your hair and threw up,” she explains. Although Day did lose her hair, she was never nauseous. Instead, she experienced anemia, fatigue, mouth sores, back pain and bloody noses. Eventually, she needed a blood transfusion. She still suffers from neuropathy, a common side effect of chemotherapy which causes tingling, pain, numbness or weakness in the hands and feet.

A freelance editor, Day attempted to continue working throughout her treatment and recovery, taking on projects as she was able. She is employed primarily by the pharmaceutical industry and she noted with great irony that one of the first assignments she received following her diagnosis involved a drug to combat cancer. While she was ill, Day relied heavily on her entire family, including her husband and her three adult children. Her diagnosis actually brought her closer to her son’s mother-in-law who is also a breast cancer survivor. “You really do need support. Friends brought me meals and my kids took turns taking me to chemo. My husband shopped, cooked and cleaned.”

Day and her husband will soon be taking a trip to Aruba to celebrate her renewed health along with their twentieth wedding anniversary. She recently participated in a 5K run with other cancer survivors and their supporters. As Day marks the first anniversary of her diagnosis this month, she has mixed feelings. “You find out what you are capable of and it makes you appreciate life. But, I have survivor’s guilt. A few friends of mine have been diagnosed with things far worse.”

Given her own experience, Day is a fervent advocate of annual mammograms. “Early detection really is a big deal. Your recurrence rate drops dramatically. I constantly remind people to go and get a mammogram.”

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Friday, September 30th, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Mammograms will be available by appointment to underinsured or uninsured women over the age of 40; some income-eligibility guidelines apply. To make an appointment for a free mammogram at Project Self-Sufficiency, interested women are invited to call 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

Project Self-Sufficiency is currently searching for Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign. Their story would appear in the *New Jersey Herald* and on the Project Self-Sufficiency website. Interested participants are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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.

