

Mother and Daughter Diagnosed with Breast Cancer



On her last day of work as a nurse before she retired at the age of 67, Jean Ransom went for her annual mammogram, as she had done every year for more than 20 years. Within days she was surprised to learn that she had Stage One breast cancer, even though she had no outward signs of the disease. Consequently, she encouraged her daughter, Paula Clark, to also obtain a screening mammogram, despite the fact

that her daughter had no visible symptoms either. Unlike her mother who had diligently received annual screenings, Paula had never had a mammogram. At 47 years old, Paula had no health insurance, but she qualified for the free mammograms offered by the NJCEED program. Both mother and daughter were shocked when Paula also received a positive diagnosis for breast cancer. “We both feel that my breast cancer saved her life,” remarked Jean. “Her cancer was more advanced than mine. If I had not encouraged her to get a mammogram because of my own cancer, it would have been years before hers was detected.”

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.

Various forms of cancer run in Jean Ransom’s family, so Jean had always been diligent about obtaining routine mammograms. Because her cancer was detected at an early stage, Jean was able to forgo chemotherapy treatments and extensive surgery. She received seven weeks of daily radiation treatments and experienced no side effects. “I tolerated it very well. However, it was an emotional roller coaster. In one day I went from being a caregiver to being a patient. Then it was quite a role reversal again, because I finished my treatments in

the middle of March and my daughter received a positive diagnosis at the same time.”

Paula had no health insurance and therefore had not ever received a mammogram prior to the one that detected her breast cancer. “I had been doing self-exams, but not very faithfully,” recalls Paula who is a stay-at-home mother of three sons. “I was so busy taking care of everyone else, I really got a mammogram just to shut everyone up. That kind of backfired on me!” Paula’s cancer was more complicated than her mother’s, requiring more testing, and ultimately surgery. Paula also required nine weeks of daily radiation treatments, but no chemotherapy. Her youngest son accompanied her to her treatments. “The whole point is that women my age often think they don’t need to be checked, but women should know that it can happen to them.”

As a retired healthcare professional, Jean has taken on the role of medical contact for her extended family. The first year of her retirement was consumed with medical appointments for herself, her daughter and other family members. Only now has Jean begun the process of relaxing and beginning to enjoy the extra time on her hands. “Life changing events make you reconsider your priorities,” noted Jean who lost her husband six years before her breast cancer diagnosis. “You don’t sweat the small stuff.” Jean spends time with her three children and ten grandchildren, exercises and keeps in touch with her friends.

Paula notes that she has also become an ardent advocate for the efficacy of mammograms, insisting that her friends and nieces get tested regularly. Her advice for women who are avoiding the test, “Go. Definitely go. Do not be afraid because there are so many people who can help you along the way, and even if you don’t have health insurance, check into the programs that offer free mammograms. If I had not done that, I would not be here.”

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, March 27th, 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.

