

Free Mammogram Flags Breast Cancer in Local Woman



At 41 years old with no history of breast cancer in her family and no health insurance, Sussex County resident Jenna Garno had never received a screening mammogram. However, when she noticed that one of her breasts had begun to look peculiar and feel hot to the touch, she picked up the phone and called Project Self-Sufficiency to take advantage of the free mammograms being offered by the agency.

That phone call ultimately led to a diagnosis of Stage 3B breast cancer. A grateful Garno will mark her third anniversary of survival this year.

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 national 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. However, according to a comprehensive compiled from 2006 - 2010 by the Komen North Jersey Affiliate among women in the agency's nine-county area, women in Sussex County, New Jersey, have fewer breast health screenings than women in the remaining eight counties, due to a limited understanding of breast health.

The Susan G. Komen North Jersey Affiliate, the local arm of the national organization, covers nine counties in northern New Jersey, including Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren. During 2006 - 2010, breast health screenings among Sussex County women was markedly lower at 71% versus a 79% rate of screenings in the remainder of the coverage area. The late stage diagnosis of breast cancer in Sussex County hovered at 52.8% while other counties in Komen North Jersey service area tallied a 46.1% late stage incidence of breast cancer. In addition, the county had an astounding rate of 29.5% breast cancer-related deaths per 100,000 people during the four-year period. By comparison, other counties in the agency's nine county service area had a much lower rate of 24.7%.

Education about breast health is one of the keys to turning around these trends in Sussex County. For the past five years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered free mammograms to area women via a mobile mammography unit several times a year.

Garno's situation was dire. Although she was employed, the single mother of two school-age girls had no health insurance. Her job as an interior plantscaper involved a lot of heavy lifting and local travel both of which would prove to be daunting once breast cancer treatment began. "I tried to stay positive and get all the information about my treatment plan so that I could answer all of my girls' questions," remarked Garno, who noted that her mother-in-law had passed away from breast cancer so her family's previous experience with the disease had not had a good outcome. "My kids' first instinct was that their mom was going to die."

Given the advanced stage of her disease, Garno elected to undergo a double mastectomy. She received chemotherapy and radiation treatments, losing her hair along the way. "I was bald during the cold weather, which was tough," she comments. She took a leave of absence from her job. With no income and no health insurance she was faced with an uncertain future, "Ultimately, I just had to let it go and give it up to God." Her supervisor kept in touch with her every week and let her know that her job was waiting for her when she was well enough to return.

Garno is in recovery from alcohol abuse, which in a strange turn of events, benefitted her during her recovery. She has a large support system. Friends brought her meals at home and turned up at the medical facility to join her during her chemotherapy treatments. She worked hard to stay positive during the ordeal. "It was my fight. I was going to give it all that I could and just hope that it was all going to be okay." Given her own experience, Garno wholeheartedly endorses screening mammograms and has little patience for those who avoid them out of fear about the procedure or the outcome. "What are you afraid of? Three minutes of being uncomfortable could save your life, and the number of people who are out there to support you is astonishing."

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Thursday, January 26th, from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Some insurance plans will be accepted; those without insurance, or those who are underinsured, are welcome to participate. Mammograms will be available by appointment to 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.

