

Breast Cancer Survivor Credits her own Persistence for Saving her Life



Judy Kaplan was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer at the age of 43; she has survived for 29 years, despite repeated diagnoses of cancer in her lymph nodes, spine, ovary and lungs. Her oncologist refers to her as “medial miracle.” Judy thinks her survival is due to early detection, persistence and luck. There is no history of breast

cancer in her family, and her mother lived until the age of 102.

Judy’s breast cancer was detected years before annual mammograms were recommended. She noticed one of her breasts leaking and immediately went to the doctor, who dismissed her worries as inconsequential. Not one to be deterred, Judy persisted, visiting four separate physicians at the urging of her sister-in-law before receiving a diagnosis of Stage Four breast cancer. By that time, the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes and to her spine. She underwent surgery and received her first dose of chemotherapy before she was discharged from the hospital. She continued to receive chemotherapy for a whopping 18 months, and had to undergo radiation treatments targeted at the breast and spine during the same time period. “Chemotherapy was very different then than it is now, which is why it took so long,” noted Judy. Subsequently, her physician prescribed an on-going dose of Tamoxifen for the next 25 years.

Judy was employed as a speech pathologist in an elementary school during her treatments. She scheduled her chemotherapy for Friday afternoons, recovered over the weekend, and trucked back to work on Mondays. “I only missed a few days of work,” commented Judy. “I got my chemo on Fridays, I slept for 24 hours and my husband took care of the kids over the weekend.” She credits her husband, along with a caring group of friends, for helping her to cope. “After I got out of the hospital, neighbors appeared out of the woods and every night for three weeks dinner was waiting on my doorstep. It was a tremendous help knowing people cared.”

Breast cancer strikes more than 200,000 women each year, and in 2007, 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. 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. In fact, while the mortality rate for breast cancer in the state of New Jersey dropped - 8.9% from 1997 to 2005, mortality in Sussex County rose +9.5% during the same period.

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.

Judy had been cancer free for 5 years when cancer was detected on her ovary. She underwent a complete hysterectomy and missed 6 weeks of work. She began taking tamoxifen and stayed on the medication for 25 years. Because of her medical history, Judy has frequent cat scans and pet scans. As a result of the tests, cancer was detected on her lung in 2009. She went immediately to Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York for treatment. As part of her recovery, she was instructed to walk 2 miles a day. She still takes frequent walks, and even mows the lawn in order to stay active. She eats carefully, and dabbled in vegetarianism, alternative medicine and macrobiotics as part of her journey. Judy is now 73 years old. “The secret to survival is early detection,” she says emphatically. “Women must be aware that they must take care of their own physical well-being. It’s your body.”

Free mammograms are offered regularly at Project Self-Sufficiency to uninsured and underinsured women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County, 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.

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Wednesday, December 5th, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED’s) program at St. Clare’s Hospital in Sussex. Interested participants are encouraged to call the hospital at 973-702-2740. In addition, Newton Memorial Hospital will provide a free mammogram for women who qualify through the Newton Memorial Hospital Foundation’s “Mammograms Save Lives” program. Those without health insurance are encouraged to contact Newton Memorial Hospital’s Education/Outreach office at 973-579-8340 for more information.

