

Breast Cancer Survivor Learns Importance of Taking Time for Herself



Breast cancer runs in June Steele's family; her mother, cousin and aunt were all diagnosed with the disease. As one of six sisters, Steele knew that there was a high probability that at least one of them would also have breast cancer. Consequently, Steele was diligent about obtaining annual mammograms. When she was directed to receive an ultrasound

following her most recent test, she guessed that she had breast cancer before the official diagnosis was given. "I had a sense that something was not right." Even though she expected the diagnosis, the news was difficult to process. "I took it hard when I first found out. It was still a shock."

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.

Unlike Steele, 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.

Even though Steele's breast cancer was detected at an extremely early stage, she still had to undergo surgery and receive chemotherapy and radiation treatments. She was pleasantly surprised to learn that she did not experience many of the negative side effects typically associated with the any of the procedures. "I went into it with a positive attitude and it helped me through it all." She adds, "Don't believe all the things that people say, because I never had a bad reaction. Everybody's different." When her hair started to fall out as a result of the medication, she boldly shaved her head. Her formerly straight hair is now growing in with more of a curl.

In addition to her positive attitude, Steele credits the support she received from family and friends for helping her cope. "I have a very supportive husband who stood by me and who took care of me." Her adult step-children understood the situation and handled the news well. Steele was careful to make sure that her teenage son received the support he needed while she was recovering. "My main concern was to make sure that he felt comfortable."

Steele works at the front desk at the Sparta Lanes bowling alley. The job requires that she be on her feet much of the day, and come face-to-face with patrons of all ages. Although she felt good enough to handle the work load during her

chemotherapy treatments, she elected to take a leave of absence from her job because she feared that her fragile immune system would be compromised even further by dealing with so many members of the public. "I did get tired a lot," she concedes. Eventually, Steele returned to work part-time. "I feel good. I'm doing more things for myself now and making sure that I feel comfortable." She has taken up bowling one day a week once again, and she is a fervent advocate for screening mammograms. She has already scheduled her annual test for the fall. "I definitely recommend mammograms to anybody!"

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%.

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Thursday, 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.

