

Local Woman Refused to Allow Cancer to Define Her



Stillwater resident Kathy Kulisz describes herself as a tough cookie. A longtime member of the Stillwater Rescue Squad and a demolition worker in a local Laborer's Union, Kathy Kulisz was known for her strength and her ability to care for others. Then she was diagnosed with breast cancer and she had to learn to allow her family and friends to take

care of her instead. "I was always one to help others. The hardest thing for me was allowing people to help me. When you first hear the words, 'you have cancer,' it's very traumatic," remarked Kathy. "But you have to tell yourself, 'it's only cancer.' Lots of people have cancer. Death is final. Cancer is a battle, and I will choose a battle anytime."

Kathy was diagnosed with Stage Three breast cancer after discovering a lump in her breast. One month later, Kathy's sister was diagnosed with Stage One breast cancer after she also felt a lump. Up until the time when both sisters received their diagnoses, there was no history of breast cancer in their family. Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2010, the year that the most statistics are available, more than 425,000 women around the world died from the disease. Breast cancer is often a silent disease, with virtually no symptoms, but it is often completely curable if diagnosed in its early stages. Like Kathy and her sister, 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 99%. 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.

Kathy's breast cancer treatment progressed quickly. She had surgery and endured eight weeks of chemotherapy. "I lost all of my hair but it didn't bother me at all. I looked good bald!" Kathy decided very early on in the process of diagnosis and treatment that she was going to maintain a positive attitude. "I was not ashamed to let people know that I had cancer and I was not going to let cancer define who I was. Beauty is who you are inside."

Kathy and her sister live close enough to each other that they were able to attend radiation sessions together. "Radiation was our together time," noted Kathy. Given her experience, Kathy has become an even more outspoken advocate of early detection in the fight against breast cancer. "My sister and I were always very diligent about getting our mammograms and taking care of ourselves. I get very upset when I hear people say that they won't get a mammogram. I tell people that you know your body better than anybody else. Doctors do the best they can but medicine is a science. We can't be afraid to speak up if our bodies are saying that something isn't right."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, January 30th, 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.

