

## **Breast Cancer Survivor Urges Women to Listen to their Bodies**



A family history of breast cancer led Laura Marschall to be diligent about seeing her doctor for annual exams. She began receiving screening mammograms at the age of 35. Several years later, her physician found a lump in one of her breasts during her annual exam. A diagnostic mammogram indicated that the mass did not appear to be malignant, so

her physician recommended that Marschall keep an eye on it for the time being. Marschall walked away from that appointment feeling very unsettled. "I was very nervous after that. I didn't feel relieved at all. I could clearly feel it, and I felt that lump every day for six months. When I noticed that it had changed, I went straight to a breast surgeon." A biopsy revealed that Marschall, 39, had an aggressive form of breast cancer which was determined to be at Stage Two. "I was terrified," recalls Marschall. "There were a lot of big ugly cries after that!"

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.

According to the New Jersey Department of Health, breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed among New Jersey women and the second leading cause of death, after lung cancer, attributed to cancer in the state. In 2013, more than 7,500 New Jersey women were diagnosed with breast cancer. The rate at which new cases of breast cancer are being diagnosed in Sussex County, as well as in the rest of the state, is stable, according to the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control. The county's breast cancer deathrate is also falling, in accordance with state and national trends. However, the disease contributes to the death of 1,300 New Jersey women annually. Access to breast cancer screenings and optimal treatments is an urgent public health issue.

A full-time employee in the research & development division of a pharmaceutical company, Marschall made an effort to remain at work throughout her treatment and recovery. She credits a strong support system among her colleagues, friends and family for helping her to cope. Neighbors banded together and regularly provided meals for Marschall's family during the six-month period when she was receiving chemotherapy. When Marschall's hair began to fall out as a result of the chemotherapy,

Marschall's mother wielded the clippers and shaved her daughter's head. "I had a huge support system, my employer was very supportive and I really appreciated my family and friends," recalls Marschall.

Keeping family life as normal as possible was a huge goal for Marschall, who managed to get her young son to school each day and even host a birthday celebration in the midst of her treatment. Now that she is on the road to recovery, she has had time to reflect on what she has gone through. "You mourn for your body and how it was, but you are grateful to still be alive. You appreciate the simple things like taking a walk outside. It's amazing what becomes clear."

Since her diagnosis, Marschall has been spreading the word in person and on social media about the importance of early detection in the fight against breast cancer. "Be diligent and get that mammogram done! That mammogram saved my life. And go for a clinical exam at the doctor's office and do self-exams. Make sure that you are aware of how your body normally feels, so that if there are any changes, you will notice them. Don't hesitate to ask for help and listen to your body."

For the past seven years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered breast health education with the goal of encouraging local women to take a proactive role in monitoring their health. Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign 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.

