

## Local Woman Credits Mammogram for Saving Her Life



Because of a family history of breast cancer, Linda McSweeney had made it a habit to get an annual mammogram. She happened to skip one year and was horrified to receive the news the following year that her screening mammography had revealed suspicious clusters which required further investigation. Ultimately, she

learned that she had not one but two forms of breast cancer, neither one of which would have been detected without a mammogram until her treatment options were drastically reduced. The cancer had also spread to her lymph nodes. McSweeney was 48 years old.

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.

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%.

McSweeney sprang into action after receiving her diagnosis, twice undergoing surgery and then receiving chemotherapy and radiation treatments. She never missed a day of work as a business analyst at Selective Insurance Company of America in Branchville, although she did work from home a handful of times. She tried to keep a sense of humor about her predicament. "I didn't have to worry about my hairstyle for a long time," McSweeney jokes about the hair loss associated with the chemotherapy treatments. "I felt terrible but I kept working throughout. I didn't let it stop me." Traveling has always been an interest of McSweeney's and despite her symptoms, she even went on a business trip to California for a week in the middle of her chemotherapy regimen.

She maintains that she could not have coped without the support of her three daughters, husband, neighbors, friends and co-workers. Her husband was by her side when

she received the initial diagnosis, and he continues to support her. "He was my oak. He was with me every step of the way." Telling her teenage daughters about her situation took some strength, but McSweeney faced it head on. "I told them all together. It was a little teary, but I kept my composure. And we always talked about it. People say that it takes a community to raise a child, but it also takes a community to get a person through a diagnosis of cancer."

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. 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.

Because of her experience, McSweeney has become an even stronger advocate for the importance of screening mammograms in the fight against breast cancer. When she read about the need for breast cancer survivors willing to tell their story as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign, she called immediately. "That mammogram saved my life. And the earlier that breast cancer is detected, the better."

The experience of having cancer has changed McSweeney. "I live life to the fullest." She emphasizes the importance of gatherings with her family and friends, enjoying camping trips and other outings. "Do what makes you happy."

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 also available. 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.

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.

