

Four Women Connected by More than Love



Mary Ann Foose and her husband, Jim, were fortunate to have four daughters. Healthy and robust throughout childhood, the daughters grew to adulthood without a major incident. Then, at the age of 62, Mary Ann developed breast cancer. Three weeks later, she was startled to learn that her daughter, Brenda, had also been diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of

later. Mary Ann's daughter Brenda, who had already survived breast cancer, also elected to have the surgery. However, Barbara, Mary Ann's oldest daughter was perfectly healthy. She had no symptoms of breast cancer and she had followed a vegan lifestyle for years. Similarly, Mary Ann's other healthy daughter, Sandy, continued to ponder her options. Eventually, all four women elected to surgically remove all of the organs which could potentially host cancer cells due to the mutated BRCA genes. The two genes caused the four women to have a total of twenty-eight surgeries to remove breasts, ovaries and all of the areas Mary Ann refers to as the "she" organs.

38. Thankfully, both women survived, thanks to rigorous treatment with chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. However, the truly devastating news was yet to come.

Mary Ann was the child of divorced parents. As a youngster, she lost touch with her father's side of the family, but Mary Ann managed to reconnect with a distant cousin after her brush with cancer. She was shocked to learn that her paternal grandmother had died from breast cancer and that one of her cousins had had terminal ovarian cancer. Armed with this new knowledge, Mary Ann took it upon herself to consult a genetic specialist at Morristown Memorial Hospital to discuss the possibility of genetic testing. "During all of that time, I just knew that it wasn't right that I and my 38-year-old daughter were both diagnosed with breast cancer only 3 weeks apart," noted Mary Ann.

Each year, more than 200,000 women develop breast cancer, but only a small percentage of those women have a genetic form of the disease. Changes in the genes associated with breast cancer, known as the BRCA 1 and BRCA 2 genes, can increase the risk of developing cancer of the breast and ovaries. In fact, a woman who has inherited a harmful mutation in [BRCA1](#) or [BRCA2](#) is about five times more likely to develop breast cancer than a woman who does not have such a mutation, according to the National Cancer Institute. These mutations may also increase a woman's risk of developing cancer of the cervix, uterus, pancreas, colon, stomach, gallbladder, bile duct, and skin. A man who has inherited a mutated BRCA gene may have an increased risk of cancer of the breast, pancreas, testes, and prostate.

However, the altered BRCA genes tend to run in families of Ashkenazi Jews and people of Norwegian, Dutch or Icelandic descent. Neither Mary Ann Foose nor her husband Jim hailed from any the potentially harmful ethnic backgrounds. Still, Mary Ann pushed on. At her urging, all four daughters agreed to be tested. Several weeks later, Mary Ann and her daughters received the grim news: In addition to Mary Ann, three out of her four daughters tested positive for both genetic mutations. For Mary Ann's daughter, Brenda, who had already battled breast cancer, the assessment was not surprising. However, the information meant that Mary Ann's healthy daughters, Sandy and Barbara, also had the genetic material to develop cancer at any time.

Those who undergo genetic testing for the BRCA gene mutations are usually required to undergo counseling at the same time. Receiving news of the possibility of developing a terminal illness while you are still healthy leaves the recipient with a tangled web of choices. Should the patient undergo radical surgery to remove perfectly healthy tissue, or leave well enough alone and live in constant fear of developing cancer? Compounding the news for Mary Ann was the possibility that her four grandchildren could also have inherited the gene. "It's such a shock when you find out something like that, and then to find out that you have passed it on, it's a real double whammy," remarked Mary Ann recently. "You look at your options. The only way to stop it is to not have children."

Mary Ann is a decisive woman. The Monday morning after she received the news about her genetic make-up, she scheduled a double mastectomy. She stoically marched back to work two weeks

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.

One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet unlike Mary Ann and her daughters, the majority of them have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram. 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. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Project Self-Sufficiency, in conjunction with the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®, Intercar Mercedes Benz, Sussex Honda, the New Jersey Herald, and the Sussex County Cancer Coalition have sponsored a campaign, "Mammograms Save Lives," to underscore the importance of annual mammograms to the residents of Sussex County. The effort includes flyers, billboards and newspaper ads, along with a public relations campaign.

Eight years after her diagnosis, Mary Ann is retired from her job as a secretary with the New Jersey public schools. She is no longer preoccupied with breast cancer. "It is mostly out of my mind now. I do not dwell on it because it's over, it's done, it's gone, and I just go on." However, she continues to recommend mammograms and genetic testing. "I talk to anyone who will listen about having check-ups and mammograms. If you don't have it done and you have a history in the family, it would be like playing Russian Roulette. Why wait until you have cancer, and have to go through chemotherapy and radiation? I opt for life instead."

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 year, almost 150 women have been able to receive a mammogram through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency. The next available date for a free mammogram is Wednesday, December 1st, from 10:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. 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.

