

Routine Mammogram Credited for Saving Local Woman's Life



As a middle school English teacher, Mary Ann Risley usually used her annual Spring Break to get medical exams and routine screenings. She has no family history of breast cancer but she obtained routine mammograms each year because, as she says, "That is what you are supposed to do!" At the age of 61, Risley dutifully received a screening mammogram. "I had no reason to think that I would have breast cancer," she noted. After a follow-up screening, she was greeted by the radiologist and the mammogram technician. "When the radiologist comes in with the nurse, it is never a good sign," Risley remarks. Based on her test results, it was recommended that Risley undergo a biopsy because they suspected that she had breast cancer. "It was a huge 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.

Risley was eventually diagnosed with Stage One Triple Negative breast cancer. She is adamant that her routine mammogram saved her life. "My oncologist explained to me that if I had waited until I felt a lump, it would have killed me. I am a very lucky person. That mammogram absolutely saved my life. There is no question in my mind that without that mammogram, I would not be here."

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%.

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.

Risley received the news of her diagnosis while at work. She immediately shared the news with her co-workers, who

were very supportive of her at that point, and throughout her treatment and recovery. She also received support from her two adult daughters, her husband, her friends, and her church community. "Sometimes people aren't sure what to say to someone who has cancer. Just letting someone know you are thinking about or praying for them is a great help. My friends made and blessed a prayer shawl for me. I took it to all my tests, appointments and even the hospital with me. It served two purposes. It kept me warm. Many of the rooms you have to be in are cold. But more importantly it made me feel safe and loved. I still wrap myself up in it sometimes to remind myself how lucky I am."

Because Risley's breast cancer was diagnosed at such an early stage, she was not a candidate for chemotherapy. She received radiation treatments following a surgical procedure and continues to see her physicians regularly. "Once this happens to you, you have an oncologist for the rest of your life," she explains.

Eight years later, Risley has retired from teaching, and is currently serving as Warden at Christ Church in Newton and enjoying being a grandmother. Because triple negative breast cancer has a strong possibility of recurrence, she notes that she still gets "twitchy" when it is time for her annual mammogram. "Otherwise, I really don't think about it." The experience of having had cancer changed her profoundly. "I really find a whole lot less to complain about!" She has also made shawls for acquaintances and friends who were facing cancer. "After I received the shawl and it helped me so much, I made shawls for people I knew who were facing cancer. My friends and I blessed them. Over the years I have made and given shawls, along with the prayer we use to bless them, to many friends. They all told me that they found the shawls helpful."

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.

