

Breast Cancer Survivor Begins Next Chapter of Her Life



Before she reached the age of 40, Mary Ullmann had been widowed and survived two separate bouts of breast cancer as well as a separate battle with lung cancer. At the age of 37, she received a diagnosis of Stage Three breast cancer only after visiting numerous physicians in search of a reason for the extreme discomfort she felt while nursing her youngest daughter. Eventually, Ullmann

endured a mastectomy and had half of one of her lungs removed, along with the accompanying odyssey of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Her extended family including her sister, parents, spouse, in-laws and other relatives helped to care for her three young daughters as Ullmann faced one round of surgery and chemotherapy after another. The mother of three is now a 59-year-old grandmother facing a divorce from her second husband. "I am starting a whole new chapter of my life now," remarks Ullmann. "I am really curious about what this next chapter of my life is going to bring."

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 death rate 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.

Recently Ullmann had to make a return visit to her oncologist when another nodule was found in her lung. "My whole psyche went back to that dark place where you go when you are first diagnosed. Your whole life flashes before you," explains Ullmann. "If I stop to think about all that I have gone through, I don't think I could do it again. My children made me a survivor. You do it for your children."

Ullmann's circumstances are very different now. Years ago, after her health issues abated, she returned to work as a

surgical coordinator for a local gynecology practice. She found that she was extra sensitive to the needs of patients who had been diagnosed with breast abnormalities. Over the years, she has volunteered to assist with breast cancer support groups, and she is often called upon to counsel breast cancer patients from the area. "When I was going through all of it, the only people I connected with were older because there wasn't a lot of support here at the time." She advises women who are unsure about their health to get a mammogram. "Be your own advocate until you feel comfortable. I knew something wasn't right, and it was only because of my persistence that I am alive today."

Ullmann has a mixture of trepidation and excitement as she contemplates her life now. She is very proud of her three daughters, one of whom is still in college, "I feel like I played an important part in their lives by showing them how to survive, but this part of my life is scary. I must set a plan for myself so that I can retire someday."

As a teenager and young adult, Ullmann played guitar and sang in local venues. Once her children came along, she gave that up. "I stopped for 20 years while I was raising my kids," explains Ullmann, who has started playing solo or as a duet in local establishments once more. "It's fun! Music is a part of my soul. Music takes me to where I need to be."

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.

