

Cancer Survivor Ready for Next Chapter of her Life



The first thing you notice about Mary Ullmann is her striking blue eyes. Then she tells you about her odyssey through three separate bouts with cancer and you become aware of the steely reserve in her soft voice. Mary lost her first husband when she was just 33 years old. A widow with two young daughters, Mary felt very blessed to find love again a few years later. She gave birth to another daughter and immediately noticed that something was

wrong. She was in agony when she tried to nurse, and her milk was expressed in huge clots. Her physicians chalked up the situation to mastitis. As an experienced mother, Mary knew that something else was going on. When her daughter was 18 months old, she found a large lump in her breast. A mammogram and a follow-up ultrasound showed dense tissue but nothing out of the ordinary. Mary persisted, taking her films to a surgeon who consulted a second radiologist; neither physician noticed anything remiss, but the surgeon offered to conduct a biopsy as a precaution. A few days later Mary was stunned to learn that she had Stage Three breast cancer. She was just 37 years old.

Breast cancer strikes more than 200,000 women each year, and in 2007, the year that the most recent statistics are available, more than 40,000 women died as a result. Breast cancer is often a silent disease, with virtually no symptoms, but it is often completely curable if diagnosed in its early stages. 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. 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.

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. 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.

Mary showed her original mammography results to an oncologist who took one look at them and offered a radically different opinion; not only did the original mammogram demonstrate breast cancer, but it showed that the cancer had already spread to Mary's lymph nodes. Mary began a grueling regimen of surgery and chemotherapy. She continued to care for her children, receiving help from her sister and her parents. Mary recalls the day that she woke up in the recovery room, thinking that her second child was graduating from kindergarten that day, and wondering if she would be around to witness any significant milestones for her three children as they grew. Her oldest daughter vividly recalls pulling shanks of hair out of her mother's head as the chemotherapy treatments began to take their

toll; she was only seven years old.

Six months later, Mary received a phone call. A spot had been found on her lung. Three weeks later, Mary was back in the hospital. This time, half of her lung was removed. The recovery from this procedure took a much longer time, and once again, Mary relied on her husband, sisters and parents to offer support. Mary gradually recovered, but remained vigilant, "You're always waiting for the other shoe to drop." Sadly, one day, the shoe dropped again. A routine mammogram indicated pre-cancerous tissue in Mary's other breast. By this time, the routine seemed familiar. Surgery and reconstruction followed, but this time, no chemotherapy or radiation treatments were required.

Once Mary's children were all in school full time, she returned to her career as a Surgical Coordinator in a local physician's office. She finds that she is extra sensitive to the needs of patients who have been diagnosed with breast abnormalities. 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." Mary's beautiful blue eyes get a little misty as she recounts the milestones she has been able to witness because she refused to give up. She is now a grandmother. Her youngest daughter is about to graduate from high school. "I think of my life as a chapter book. That's how I get through it. Sometimes I think I am finished with a chapter, but I then I find that I have to go back and add something. Then I close it up and move on."

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 few years, hundreds of women have received free mammograms through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Thursday, March 28th, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program at Saint Clare's Hospital in Sussex. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. Interested participants are encouraged to call the hospital at 973-702-2740. 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.

