

Young Woman Trusts Her Instincts and Saves Her Own Life. Twice.



Meghan Haarmann credits an inconsequential bruise with saving her life. The bruise was on one of her breasts. Since she was between jobs at the time, she waited three months before visiting a physician. Her doctor was stumped and sent her for a mammogram and an ultrasound. Dissatisfied with a second physician's interpretation of her results, Meghan pressed on, visiting numerous doctors, receiving conflicting diagnoses, and enduring multiple mammograms, biopsies, ultrasounds and even an MRI. She was finally informed that she had a particularly invasive form of breast cancer that would have to be treated with surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Meghan was dumbfounded. At the age of 32 and with no family history of the disease, she was an unlikely candidate for such a diagnosis. Had she not trusted her own instincts and insisted on the opinions of other doctors, the cancer would not have been diagnosed until a much later, more life-threatening stage. "It turns out that the bruise was nothing but the instinct to trust your gut is so important," noted Meghan.

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.

During the treatment for her breast cancer, Meghan's father passed away, her partner of nine years walked out, and she was informed by her employer that her services as a veterinary technician were no longer required. Instead of whining, Meghan used the opportunity to go back to school and become certified as a phlebotomist. "I became really good at just telling myself that this is all happening for a reason. I figured that if I was good at drawing blood from a feral cat, I could handle a vein from a two-legged!"

Meghan also learned to rearrange the priorities in her life. "The cancer experience was meant to alter my life, not end my life." In the absence of her partner, Meghan was forced to lean more heavily on her two sisters for support. "I am the

youngest of three sisters and we couldn't be closer. When you go through such a traumatic experience, you just try to survive from one day to the next and I thought I had to be strong for my friends and family. I wasn't really able to share with anyone how afraid I really was. It hurt my sisters that I didn't share my fears and I learned from that."

Following her recovery, Meghan began to volunteer alongside other cancer survivors with an organization that assists medical students with training, sharing the story of her diagnosis and treatment and offering suggestions for dealing with patients. "It's rewarding because it's therapeutic for me to talk about it, and it really makes an impact to remind these students to treat the person, not just the disease."

She has also become a more spiritual person. "Even bad days are good days. I have met many women along the way who are not here anymore. It gives you a sense of gratitude, and you want to live for them."

Because of her youth, Meghan has faced constant struggles with her insurance company over necessary diagnostic procedures. While undergoing treatment for breast cancer, she encountered digestive tract issues so severe she once again trusted her instincts and insisted on getting a colonoscopy. Despite her youth and the lack of family history of colon cancer, three pre-cancerous polyps were found. Her insurance company balked at paying for the procedure. "If I hadn't insisted on that I would have gotten colon cancer!" exclaims Meghan. Her sister, who now has a family history of breast cancer, has faced similar insurance issues with funding for mammograms.

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, August 2nd, 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. Free mammograms are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED's) program at St. Clare's Hospital in Sussex. 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.

