

Breast Cancer Survivor Celebrates with a Trip to Mexico



Nadine Olsen worked as a paraprofessional with special education students in the Frankford Township school district for 23 years. After being diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 54, Olsen initially tried to continue working throughout her treatment and recovery. Eventually, the cumulative effects of the chemotherapy treatments became too exhausting, so

Olsen took early retirement. "I do miss it. I love the kids," recalls Olsen. "They did the journey with me. I had to explain the concept of cancer to them in a positive way. They learned from me, but I also learned from them. I learned patience, and the importance of maintaining a sense of humor." Olsen explains that she felt a singular sense of solidarity with the children in her care. "They were somewhat handicapped, and now I was handicapped, too. We understood each other. When I wasn't having a good day, they cheered me up, just like I cheered them up when they were having a bad day."

Olsen located her breast cancer herself after noticing a feeling of discomfort while exercising at the gym. She insisted on seeing her physician immediately. Her family history did not include breast cancer, but Olsen had been proactive about receiving screening mammograms after undergoing a hysterectomy years earlier. "If it wasn't for all of my doctors believing in me and listening to me, I wouldn't be around today," notes Olsen. Follow up tests revealed two separate forms of cancer in one of her breasts.

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.

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%.

Olsen embarked on a grueling path of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments. She lost her hair and suffered several side effects from the chemotherapy, many of which she still suffers from today. She relied heavily on her husband, two children, faith and friends for support. "My husband is my rock. Even when I was at my sickest, ugliest bald self, he still looked at me like I was his beautiful bride. He was always there for me." Olsen's husband and her friends took turns transporting her to her chemotherapy treatments and medical appointments. She purchased three wigs and wore

them to work and elsewhere. "I didn't want to have the 'Big C' on my forehead. I wanted to look like everybody else," she explains.

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 practice effective early detection techniques, such as annual mammograms and self-exams. 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.

Olsen maintains that her faith was strengthened as a result of her diagnosis. "I never questioned why. God gave me the best tools, family and friends to deal with cancer. It amazed me. It was almost a gift, because I got to see how great people really are."

Olsen's colleague at school was diagnosed with breast cancer at the same time. They vowed to celebrate with a vacation to Mexico if both survived their diagnoses for five years. In April 2015, both women made the journey, accompanied by family members and friends. "I fully appreciate and love life. Every day that I wake up is a good day!"

Olsen has no patience for those who forgo screening mammograms out of fear. "Every journey is different, but how can you do that to your family? You have to do everything you can to take care of yourself."

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.

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.

