

Area Resident Survives Breast Cancer



Pat Behson often underestimates herself. As a teenager, she was surprised to learn that a favorite teacher had nominated her for a partial scholarship to the college of her choice on the basis of her high SAT scores. Pat used the scholarship to attend Texas Christian University, where she obtained a bachelor's of science degree in nursing. Upon returning home, she received a license to practice in both New Jersey and New York. Her nursing experience spans several decades, with stints at non-profit organizations, hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, private homes, and public schools. Her duties have ranged widely, encompassing all of the ad hoc responsibilities associated with caring for children in the public school system, along with the rigorous demands of private nursing. The healthcare situation that proved to be the most challenging, however, was her own battle with breast cancer. Uncharacteristically, she never questioned her ability to beat the odds.

Breast cancer runs in Pat's family, so she was always diligent about taking care of herself and monitoring her own health. Pat's diligence paid off when her suspicion that something was not right was confirmed with a mammogram. At the age of 50, Pat was diagnosed with Stage Two breast cancer.

One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet the majority of them 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. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Pat was raising three children alone and attending college for additional certification at the time of her diagnosis. She was also working at a local public school, a job that she had taken so that her schedule

would mirror that of her children. Pat managed to soldier through nine months of chemotherapy, while continuing her studies and holding onto her job. She endured more surgery and suffered mild cardiac arrest and even a stroke. Yet, far from losing her faith, Pat claims that "all along I felt that God was watching over me."

Cancer free since 1993, Pat finds joy in just about everything. She is active in her church and sees her family regularly. "I have my life. There is more to me than just breast tissue," Pat says jokingly. "I got to see two of my children get married, my grandsons were born, and I have had many great years of life. I thank God every day."

As a nurse and as a cancer survivor, Pat strongly recommends mammograms. "I recommend mammograms because it is a tool that can help to diagnose and bring attention to any abnormality in breast tissue. I also like to caution people that men get breast cancer, too."

Project Self-Sufficiency, in conjunction with the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®, Intercar Mercedes Benz, Sussex Honda, the New Jersey Herald, and the Sussex County Cancer Coalition have sponsored a campaign, "Mammograms Save Lives," to underscore the importance of annual mammograms to the residents of Sussex County. The effort includes flyers, billboards and newspaper ads, along with a public relations campaign.

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 mammograms through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

The next available date for a free mammogram is Thursday, March 3rd, 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. 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.

