

Local Woman Beats Breast Cancer Twice



Unlike many breast cancer patients who are forced to take a crash course in chemotherapy drugs as part of their treatment plan, clinical pharmacologist Patrice Bell knew exactly what she was getting in for when she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 48. She wasn't thrilled. "I know what these drugs do and I know how toxic they are.

That part of the chemotherapy had me holding my breath. As a researcher I used that drug to induce heart failure in lab animals." After a lengthy discussion with her physician, who reassured her that the dosage she would receive would not damage her heart, Patrice elected to move forward with the procedure. Follow up testing confirmed her doctor's prognosis. "He was right," Patrice admitted.

Patrice was diagnosed with Stage Two breast cancer after a routine mammogram detected the cancer in her breast. Subsequent surgery found cancer in her lymph node as well. Patrice had received annual mammograms for years despite the fact that, like most breast cancer patients, there was no history of the disease within her family. 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. 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.

Going through the process of diagnosis and recovery gave Patrice a renewed appreciation for her friends and family. "I had wonderful support from family and friends. They did everything for me, like making me brownies, cleaning my house, and making dinner for me. My sister sent me a card every day. My husband and sons gave me hugs and were there for me. My younger son had to take me to chemo one day and he covered me with his sweatshirt to keep me warm. It gave me an appreciation of the importance of support from family and friends; it makes all the difference in how you respond to treatment."

After completing an accelerated program of chemotherapy and radiation, the cancer disappeared and Patrice began to

return to her normal life. One year later, Stage One cancer was detected in her other breast through yet another routine mammogram. Because she had received such a huge dosage of chemotherapy for the original cancer, radiation treatments were all that was necessary to eradicate the cancer from the second breast. "The recovery was easier that time because I knew what to expect," noted Patrice. "I scheduled the radiation treatments at lunch time so I was able to work through it."

Throughout her odyssey, Patrice kept a careful journal of her experiences, from physical symptoms to photos of her bald head. At the request of her insurance case worker, the journal was circulated to more than 500 other case workers at the agency to help them gain a better understanding of their patients' experiences. The final entry in her journal notes, "I found that people were so giving and caring throughout this whole time, and that is probably what carried me through this with a sense of humor, and a certainty that I could face whatever came next. My hope was to do it with dignity and I got my wish."

Patrice and her sister have just completed participating in the "Sister Study," a 5-year research project commissioned by the National Institutes of Health which aims to unlock the mystery of how and why so many women are being diagnosed with breast cancer by studying 50,000 women in pairs of sisters, each of which has one sister with a diagnosis of breast cancer. "They took a detailed history of our eating habits and our environment; they looked at hormone factors, blood samples, and nail samples. I firmly believe that there is a combination of environmental effects that are playing a part."

Patrice Bell's breast cancer was diagnosed with a routine annual mammogram. 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 Wednesday, December 5th, 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 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.

