

Breast Cancer Survivor's Persistence Saves her Life



After finding a small lump in her chest, Patty Buchanan followed up immediately with her physician who recommended a mammogram. The 41-year-old mother of three young children had a family history of breast cancer, but she had received several screening mammograms in the past without incident. Buchanan knew the situation was serious when she

received a registered letter from the diagnostic facility which had conducted her mammogram and an ultrasound the very next day. "This is how you know you're in trouble," she recalls thinking as she opened the envelope.

After embarking on a course of treatment, Buchanan took her test results to an out-of-state specialist for a second opinion. The second physician located additional cancer sites and recommended more surgery followed by chemotherapy and radiation treatments. "I had a lumpectomy and a mastectomy on the same breast in the course of a month," explains Buchanan. However, she is emphatic that the trip to the second doctor undoubtedly saved her life. "Everybody should get a second opinion."

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 national 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. However, according to a comprehensive study compiled from 2006 - 2010 by the Komen North Jersey Affiliate among women in the agency's nine-county area, women in Sussex County, New Jersey, have fewer breast health screenings than women in the remaining eight counties, due in part to a limited understanding of breast health.

The Susan G. Komen North Jersey Affiliate, the local arm of the national organization, covers nine counties in northern New Jersey, including Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren. During 2006 – 2010, breast health screenings among Sussex County women was markedly lower at 71% versus a 79% rate of screenings in the remainder of the coverage area. The late stage diagnosis of breast cancer in Sussex County hovered at 52.8% while other counties in Komen North Jersey service area tallied a 46.1% late stage incidence of breast cancer. In addition, the county had an astounding rate of 29.5% breast cancer-related deaths per 100,000 people during the four-year period. By comparison, other counties in the agency's nine county service area had a much lower rate of 24.7%.

At the time of her diagnosis, Buchanan was working freelance for a public relations firm which handled clients from the financial, entertainment and technological sectors. During the entire course of her diagnosis, treatment and recovery, Buchanan rarely took time off from work. "I had no sick time because I was an independent contractor, so I just staggered through. It was really hard, but I felt useful because I was earning money."

Handling the effects of the chemotherapy was a struggle. "The exhaustion, the anxiety and the stress were terrible," Buchanan admits. She relied on her husband, extended family and friends in the community for support. Observing the impact on her children as they watched her progress through the hair loss and other side effects of the drugs made Buchanan resolve to carry on. "My kids see me as a tough cookie now and it makes me happy that I set a good example."

Nine years later, Buchanan is reluctant to dwell on the subject of cancer, although she points out, "Being a survivor does define you whether you like it or not." However, she admits that the experience changed her. "It's made me more compassionate towards others. I reach out and help other people now. It's a big experience but you can't let it define you. You need to be defined by happier times."

For the past seven years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered breast health education with the goal of turning around the negative breast cancer trends in Sussex County. Sussex County breast cancer survivors who would be willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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.

