

Breast Cancer Survivor Starts Support Group



A family history of breast cancer compelled Randi Jeddiss to visit her physician regularly and obtain annual mammograms beginning at the age of 35. She also underwent genetic testing to identify mutations in the two genes, BRCA-1 and BRCA-2, which would indicate a future susceptibility to breast cancer. Although the results of the genetic testing were negative, Jeddiss was

diagnosed with Triple Negative breast cancer after a routine mammogram detected a suspicious growth. She was only 46 years old but she was not surprised. "I was attentive because in my family I expected that cancer was going to get me," she recalls.

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.

Unlike Jeddiss, 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.

Jeddiss had surgery, followed by arduous rounds of chemotherapy and radiation. With the support of her family, she took a leave of absence from her job as a psychotherapist in order to focus on her health. She later eased back into work, gradually taking on patients and expanding her family practice once again. However, Jeddiss soon discovered that her real work was just beginning.

As a family therapist, Jeddiss felt called upon to participate in a new non-profit organization which was just beginning to take shape. Jeddiss, along with a holistic nurse and a dedicated group of cancer survivors, created the WINGS cancer support group. The organization meets regularly to provide education, activities and support for women who are currently undergoing cancer treatment or who are in varying stages of recovery. Jeddiss facilitates the support group which follows each meeting. "We laugh as hard as we cry," she comments. The group recently published their first book. "Cancer has taught me many things," muses Jeddiss, now 53 years old. "The cancer journey is never over. Cancer levels the playing field. I don't think that going through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation is the hardest part. It's afterwards. Everyone is mobilized when you are in crisis. But what do you do afterwards? That's a big part of WINGS. We are there to help you while you are going through it and we are there for you when you are done."

Jeddiss is also an active participant in the cancer recovery effort, Casting for Recovery. Once again, her skills as a therapist are put to good use. A group meets annually at a location in Warren County for a weekend of fly fishing instruction and group therapy. Given her history, Jeddiss is a huge proponent of mammograms as a diagnostic tool. "I firmly and profoundly believe in mammograms but it must be part of routine care. You must do self-exams and have regular check-ups, too."

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%.

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Thursday, June 16th, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Mammograms will be available by appointment to underinsured or uninsured women over the age of 40; some income-eligibility guidelines apply. To make an appointment for a free mammogram at Project Self-Sufficiency, interested women are invited to call 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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 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.

