

## Local Breast Cancer Survivor Becomes Mammogram Advocate



Rhona Beadle often struggles to identify herself as a breast cancer survivor, because her cancer was caught at an early stage and consequently, she did not have to undergo chemotherapy,

radical surgery or

experience a prolonged recovery. However, she acknowledges that her ability to deny the reality of her situation played a large role throughout her ordeal. “Disbelief was reigning,” she quips. Prior to her diagnosis at the age of 61, Rhona had not had a mammogram in ten years. “I told myself that I didn’t have time, and then I moved to England to live with my mother, and when I returned, I had no health insurance.” When Rhona finally got around to obtaining a screening mammogram, the results were ominous. A follow up mammogram and biopsy revealed that she had breast cancer.

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.

Rhona serves as the Executive Director of Ginnie’s House, an advocacy center for abused children located in Newton. Throughout the early stages of her diagnosis and treatment, Rhona continued to downplay the significance of the event, calling it “a tiny little thing.” She notes that the biopsy “was really very easy. I was back at work chairing a meeting by 10:00 a.m. Obviously I was still in denial.” Rhona vividly recalls receiving her diagnosis over the phone while she was at the office. I thought, “This can’t happen to me. I don’t have time for this!”

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%.

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 get an annual mammogram. 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.

Rhona had surgery and then received six weeks of radiation at the Sparta Cancer Center. She wove her treatment around her work schedule, missing only two days of work. Rhona continues to see a physician regularly, and she is in the middle of a five-year regimen of medication which has significant side effects. She notes that her husband, George, has been extremely encouraging the entire time. “I know that he was very shaken by this, but he was so supportive. He has always been right there with me.”

Rhona feels very strongly that the routine mammogram she received made all the difference for her. “I am so lucky. When I see women who have had such radical surgeries or who have had chemotherapy, I realize that I have been very fortunate. Of course, the thing that kept me fortunate was that mammogram.” Once she received her diagnosis, she gathered her staff at Ginnie’s House and urged them all to receive mammograms, too. “I made all my staff get check-ups. You have to get a mammogram. The cost of not doing so is much higher than I would ever want to pay.” She adds, “I refuse to be defined by cancer.”

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 at Project Self-Sufficiency on Thursday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, as part of the agency’s Community Health Fair. Interested recipients are invited to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 to schedule an appointment.

Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program administered by the Sussex County Health Department. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are also available. 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.

