

## Retired Teacher Shares Important Health Lesson



During her long career as a music educator, Ruth Hubmaster has touched the lives of thousands of children, both as a teacher and as the choir director and organist at her church. She is so well known that she has encountered former students in such far flung places as Disneyworld, prompting one of her relatives to marvel, "You're more

famous than Mickey Mouse!" Ruth spent her life trying to convey her love of music to children, teens and adults. Even though she retired from teaching years ago, Ruth found recently that she still had one more lesson to convey about the importance of early detection in the treatment of breast cancer and the facilities available in our area. "It's a horrible thing to have cancer, but we are lucky. The people of Sussex County do not have to be afraid," Ruth said emphatically. "If they are diagnosed with cancer, there is a good place to go."

Three years ago, a routine mammogram detected that Ruth had Stage One breast cancer. Ruth was shocked, "It happened so quickly I didn't have time to think." Although her recent health had not been good, Ruth had no family history of cancer, and she had been getting routine mammograms for 23 consecutive years without incident. Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2009, 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. Like Ruth, 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. 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%.

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.

Ruth's breast cancer treatments were complicated by an underlying blood disorder which Ruth had recently developed. During the months leading up to her breast cancer diagnosis, Ruth had been spending so much time at the

local clinic that she and the staff had become very well acquainted. "It's like that television show 'Cheers'," she noted. "When you walk in, everybody knows your name!" After she recovered from surgery, she began receiving chemotherapy treatments every three weeks. A friend accompanied her for each session. Ruth lost her hair and her health complications forced her to need additional blood transfusions. "I was extraordinarily weak." She went on to receive daily radiation treatments for six weeks and the breast cancer appeared to have been eradicated. However, three months after her last radiation session, one of Ruth's legs shattered unexpectedly. The cause was determined to be the chemotherapy and radiation treatments used to fight Ruth's breast cancer. Ruth was immediately hospitalized and underwent a complicated surgical procedure followed by a stint in a rehabilitation center. "This is not how I expected to be living my golden years," Ruth commented ruefully. Still, she soldiers on, using a walker to get around and continuing to play the organ, despite having nerve damage in her leg. She recently signed on to serve as the musical director at the Cornerstone Playhouse production of "Fiddler on the Roof."

The experience of having cancer has changed Ruth profoundly. "I have learned so much patience. I have learned so much faith. I have a totally different outlook. Every moment is precious. I thank God every day that I am still here." Ruth treasures the time she has to spend with her family, especially her grandchildren. "I am blessed. My relationship with my grandchildren is exceptional. I am very grateful."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, January 30<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, 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.

Women who are interested in receiving a free mammogram are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make 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 available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. 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.

