

Breast Cancer Survivor Celebrates Two Years and Counting



Santina Flynn was not surprised when she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 55. Seven other family members had been diagnosed with breast cancer, including her own mother who had passed away after years of battling the disease. “I knew that it was coming my way. I watched what my mother went through and I knew what I had to do.” Flynn immediately underwent surgery and

scheduled chemotherapy treatments.

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 Flynn, 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.

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%.

Flynn believes that her health history made her particularly susceptible to contracting breast cancer. Six years earlier she had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer, and she had had numerous benign lumps removed from her breasts and other parts of her body throughout adulthood. In fact, Flynn spent nine months recovering from two surgeries on her foot and she was still on crutches when she received her screening mammogram.

Flynn found that she was very sensitive to the medications used in chemotherapy and in the medications prescribed to her following her treatment. The chemotherapy drug caused severe chest pains and muscle spasms, forcing her physicians to adjust her treatment options. In addition, the preventative medication prescribed to Flynn upon completion of the chemotherapy left her with crippling side effects. As a result, Flynn turned to more holistic therapies. She extensively researched her options and developed her own cocktail of herbs and essential oils and put

herself on a diet of foods that are high in alkaline. Her physical symptoms evaporated and her mood was elevated once more.

In addition to changing her diet, Flynn found great solace in writing about her experiences. She developed a blog on the Caring Bridge website which she is in the process of turning into a book. “It’s the good, bad and the ugly that doctors don’t tell you,” she laughs, noting that a sense of humor is prevalent throughout the work. Staying in touch with others also helped her greatly during her treatment and recovery. A part-time hairstylist by trade, Flynn kept caring for her clients throughout her convalescence. When her clients would attempt to commiserate with Flynn regarding her situation, Flynn repeated, “It’s temporary!” She notes that her husband was a great source of support, bringing her medication and soothing music when she became overwhelmed, and accompanying her to all of her medical appointments.

Surviving cancer has changed her in many ways. “I was very positive the whole time. I’ve always been spiritual, but now I am a thousand times more spiritual! I surround myself with people and things that I enjoy. I have no tolerance for people that are negative. I enjoy life and embrace every single day.” Flynn will celebrate her second year of survival in May, 2016. An avid horticulturalist, she is looking forward to working in her garden and yard. “I’m excited about this summer.”

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.

