

Mother Fights to Survive Breast Cancer Diagnosis to be there for her Kids



In 2015, at the age of 35, Sara Snyder was employed full-time, happily married and the healthy mother of two young children. One year later, Snyder is now recovering from a double mastectomy and prolonged chemotherapy treatments, and preparing for a complete hysterectomy. During the previous summer, Snyder was diagnosed with Triple Negative breast cancer after noticing an unusual lump in one of her breasts. Genetic testing revealed

that Snyder was also a carrier of the mutated BRCA 1 gene, a known contributor to both breast and ovarian cancers. "I was absolutely in complete shock," recalls Snyder, whose mother had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer the previous month. Given the fact that Snyder's paternal grandmother had died from breast cancer, Snyder had some significant decisions to make about her own health. "The BRCA results sealed the deal on those decisions," notes Snyder. She elected to pursue a double mastectomy immediately rather than take a chance at having the cancer recur at a later date.

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.

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%. Snyder had never had a screening mammogram because at the age of 35 she had been considered too young.

Following her recovery from surgery, Snyder tolerated five months of chemotherapy treatments relatively well. "I did chemo in smaller doses so it was more manageable. Some people didn't even know I was going through treatments." Snyder subsequently made plans for a hysterectomy, noting that making the decision to pursue the surgery was not difficult. "It wasn't that big of a deal, because I already had two children." Her daughter was eleven and her son was eight while Snyder was undergoing treatment and recovery. "Telling my children was the hardest part," she explains. "I know that my daughter understood, but my son just stayed very quiet the whole time. They were really good through it all. Very mature and very responsible."

During the past year, Snyder has relied heavily on her husband, family, friends and colleagues for support. Her children took over packing their own lunches for school, and assisted with household chores, like cleaning, vacuuming and washing dishes. "My

husband was really good. He picked up a lot of slack when I went through surgery. He took off a month from work and ran the whole show!" Snyder also took a leave of absence from her job as a sales administrator at a local computer company. She eventually returned to work part-time. "I wanted to be there for my kids while they were still so young," she explains.

Snyder recently joined a gym and she has been working hard to get her strength back. "I am about 90% back to where I was. With kids you have to stay strong. They drive you to do things." Although she has been faring well physically, the emotional roller coaster has taken its toll. Snyder has lost more than one friend to cancer recently. "I was glad to be there to help them and to guide them. It was gratifying to be able to coach them through the process. But, it's so hard to not say 'that could have been me.'" Snyder seeks out other breast cancer survivors and enjoys attending events like the Survivor Event hosted by Project Self-Sufficiency each spring. "Meeting new people who are going through the same situation helps me to cope. We share a special bond."

She admits that she has probably not fully comprehended how the experience has altered her life. "Going through the process was definitely an eye-opener on life for me. You appreciate everything and everybody in your life. You don't sweat the small things. I prioritize my kids and enjoy the time we have, because you never know."

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Thursday, December 1st, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Some insurance plans will be accepted; those without insurance, or those who are underinsured, are welcome to participate. Mammograms will be available by appointment to 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.

