

## Breast Cancer Survivor Rallies to be there for her Family



Surviving a diagnosis of breast cancer is an ongoing journey for local resident Soraya Maceyak, who found a lump in one of her breasts at the age of 47. With a family history of cancer and a grandmother who had been diagnosed with breast cancer, Maceyak had been diligently receiving mammograms since the age of 32. A flurry of diagnostic tests eventually revealed that she had Stage Two breast cancer. Maceyak, a mother of one and step-mother of three children, whose son was

only a toddler at the time, was distraught when she learned the news. "I kept saying 'Why?' I didn't bring my son into this world for him to have no mother."

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.

Breaking the news to her step-daughters, who ranged in age from 9 to 15 at the time, was a painful process for Maceyak. She even found herself having to define cancer for the youngest girl. "We all huddled together crying," she recalls. "I told them that we're going to pull through this together. I want to see all of you grow up, succeed, graduate and get married."

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%.

Making it through her treatments and recovery became a family affair for Maceyak. Her husband accompanied her to every doctor's appointment and chemotherapy treatment. "A lot of the burden fell on my husband who pulled double duty. Edward Maceyak Jr., my husband, my rock embodies the true meaning of love and sacrifice." Maceyak's parents assisted her through bouts of nausea and pneumonia. Her mother-in-law, a former stylist, gave her a haircut when Maceyak's hair began to fall out as a side effect of the chemotherapy and accompanied Maceyak when she went shopping for a wig to match her new hairdo. "Losing your hair physically hurts," recalls Maceyak. "It was the most traumatic thing I've ever experienced, besides getting the news that I had cancer."

Throughout the relentless chemotherapy appointments and radiation treatments, Maceyak continued to work as the Accounts Receivable Credit and Chargeback Manager at a local manufacturing company. "I worked because I needed to keep myself distracted from what was happening instead of staying home and crying about it," she explains. "It was important to me that I was active and didn't let this challenge knock me to the ground. So there were times I was sitting in my chair during chemo

on the phone with sales reps or working on my laptop."

Unlike Macayek, the majority of those diagnosed with breast cancer each year have no family history of the disease. The American Cancer Society recently revised its recommendations for screening mammograms, suggesting that women start receiving annual mammograms at age 45, rather than 40 as previously recommended. At the age of 55, screening mammograms can be cut back to one every two years provided the patient is healthy and has a life expectancy of at least 10 more years. Those women who want to start mammograms at an earlier age or continue annual screenings past the age of 55 should be allowed to do so, according to the non-profit group. However, several organizations, such as the American College of Radiology and the Society of Breast Imaging, still endorse the onset of annual mammograms at the age of 40. The Susan G. Komen for the Cure® North Jersey, a member of the United States Preventative Services Task Force, recommends that women ages 40 – 49 discuss a start date for annual mammography with their health care provider.

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 15 - 40%. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure; the vast majority of the approximately 230,000 breast cancers diagnosed each year in the United States are now found at early stages when the chance of survival exceeds 90%.

Like many women, Macayek has dense breasts which can make a diagnosis of breast cancer more challenging. "I made my sister get checked as soon as she turned 40," remarks Maceyak who fervently recommends mammograms. "You have to take care of your own health first. Get yourself checked. If you feel wonky, don't leave it for later. Do it now!"

Free mammograms will be offered at Project Self-Sufficiency on Friday, November 13<sup>th</sup>, with funding from the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED) Program. The NJCEED 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.

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.

