

## Stem Cell Therapy Cures Local Woman's Breast Cancer



Susan Sacco did not have a happy 44<sup>th</sup> birthday. Instead of celebrating with her family, Susan was on the phone with her physician, receiving the news that she had an aggressive form of breast cancer. The cancer was growing so rapidly that it had not shown up on the mammogram she had received only 3 months earlier. Susan had found a

pea-shaped lump in her breast during a self-exam, so she returned to her doctor after finding the lump and requested an additional mammogram. Once again, the exam showed nothing unusual, despite the fact that Susan could feel the lump with her fingers. Susan notes, "I was among those women whose cancer is not found on a mammogram."

Cancerous cells appear lighter than the surrounding tissue on a mammogram, which makes the test an effective diagnostic tool. However, a certain percentage of women have "dense" breast tissue, which also appears lighter on a mammogram. According to the National Cancer Institute, screening mammograms can miss up to 20% of breast cancers that are present at the time of the exam, and many of these cancers occur in patients with dense breast tissue. To make matters worse, the risk of cancer is higher in those with dense breasts.

Breast density varies from woman to woman and can also change as women age; nearly 75% of women in their forties have dense breasts, but this number decreases to 31% of women once they reach their 70's, according to the American Society of Breast Surgeons.

After receiving her results, Susan began an odyssey which would ultimately take her to Hackensack University Hospital for participation in a research project using stem cell therapy in the treatment of breast cancer. The good news was that Susan's unique medical situation qualified her for the project. The bad news was that she would have to stay in a nearby hotel for the duration of the treatments, relying on friends, family and a battalion of visiting nurses to provide a continuous flow of fluids and antibiotics. At one point, Susan succumbed to a fever and was rushed to Chilton Memorial Hospital. "When I was doing the traditional chemo out of Chilton I developed a fever. I stayed a week at Chilton then when they cleared me, I was admitted to Hackensack where they did the stem cell procedure that saved my life." When Susan finally returned home she endured daily radiation treatments for a month.

Breast cancer strikes more than 200,000 women each year, and in 2007, 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 Susan Sacco, 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. 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. In fact, while the mortality rate for breast cancer in the state of New Jersey dropped -8.9% from 1997 to 2005, mortality in Sussex County rose +9.5% during the same period.

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%. Getting regular screening mammograms, conducting self-exams and receiving clinical breast exams are the most effective ways to detect breast cancer. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Free mammograms are offered regularly at Project Self-Sufficiency to uninsured and underinsured women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County, 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.

Susan has completely recovered from her breast cancer and in 16 years has had no signs of recurrence, although she continues to have semi-annual CAT scans and mammograms. However, the stem cell therapy which cured her has had devastating health consequences. Susan suffers from fibromyalgia, osteoporosis and Sjorgens Syndrome, an autoimmune disease in which immune cells attack and destroy the exocrine glands which produce tears and saliva. During the time she spent in the hotel all of those years ago, Susan found herself praying that she would be able to live to see her three children married, and meet her grandchildren. Those long-ago wishes have been granted. Lately, Susan says she has been praying to stay alive long enough to meet her great-grandchildren. "I wouldn't want anyone to go through a stem cell treatment," commented Susan recently. "But when it's a life or death situation, you look for faith, support, a good doctor, you have a positive attitude and that's how you get through it. Cancer changes you. After a few years go by, you start to take things for granted again. You have to put your mind in a different place and be thankful for every day that you have."

A few years ago, Susan was invited to speak at a regional conference to celebrate the 3,000<sup>th</sup> stem cell transplant. She brought along her mother and her two adult daughters. "I spoke about how I was one of the original patients and how successful it was for me. I have experienced a lot. It was a long haul. But I'm alive and I try to stay positive."

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency on Thursday, September 6th, from 10:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. Interested women are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED's) program at St. Clare's Hospital in Sussex. Interested participants are encouraged to call the hospital at 973-702-2740. In addition, Newton Memorial Hospital will provide a free mammogram for women who qualify through the Newton Memorial Hospital Foundation's "Mammograms Save Lives" program. Those without health insurance are encouraged to contact Newton Memorial Hospital's Education/Outreach office at 973-579-8340 for more information.

