

## Breast Cancer Survivor Emphasizes the Importance of Regular Mammograms



Sussex County breast cancer survivor Tammie Dehnert is emphatic when she discusses mammograms. “More people need to be aware that mammograms really do save lives!” Dehnert should know. At the age of 49, a routine mammogram revealed that Dehnert had breast cancer. She had no family history and no symptoms prior to her

diagnosis, but she had made it a habit to get an annual mammogram for years. “It was just something that I did. My doctor recommended it when I turned 40, so I went.”

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.

Things moved quickly following Dehnert’s mammogram. A biopsy was followed by more surgery. Then came the chemotherapy. The type of cancer Dehnert had required a specific and potent cocktail of drugs, which had almost immediate side effects. At first she tried to conceal her health issues while at work, preferring to keep her personal life private. Dehnert has worked in the sales reporting department for a local manufacturer for 27 years. She quickly succumbed to the side effects of her chemotherapy treatment, however, and ultimately took a leave of absence from her job. “I left work for a year but they kept my job for me,” remarked Dehnert, who realizes that she was fortunate. “They didn’t have to do that, but they were very flexible and accommodating.”

Dehnert received chemotherapy infusions every three weeks. In between treatments she suffered. “I was so weak, I could barely walk. I got migraines and I was exhausted.” She received multiple blood transfusions to counteract the symptoms. “My whole family was very supportive. My husband was amazing. He had more patience than I ever thought possible, and my two daughters were very good.” She still marvels at the kindness of her extended family and neighbors, who brought endless streams of food for her family and assisted them in other ways. “I had strangers coming to my door with food! People came out of the woodwork.”

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%.

Sharing her story was important for Dehnert who feels that the general public needs to be educated on the importance of annual mammograms. “I had been getting mammograms for ten years. There’s nothing more important than your health.”

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. 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.

Dehnert acknowledges that surviving a cancer diagnosis has changed her. “I look at life differently now. Every day is a gift. My priorities have changed. I really appreciate life, and I have a lot of survivor friends now.” Throughout her diagnosis and treatment, Dehnert became friendly with several other breast cancer survivors. The group now meets regularly to celebrate each other and to participate in group activities in support of those who are enduring breast cancer treatments.

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.

