

## Local Woman Returns from Africa to Battle Breast Cancer



Thelma Landrud spent her career as a missionary in the northwest corner of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, working as an obstetrical/gynecological nurse in a 200-bed hospital that often had no electricity. After 40 years, she retired and returned to her childhood home in Sussex County. Although Thelma had worked primarily with female

patients in Africa, she rarely saw patients with breast cancer. In contrast, she was surprised to learn that her native Sussex County, New Jersey, had one of the highest incidences of incurable breast cancer in the state. She was even more surprised when a routine mammogram taken shortly after she returned showed a questionable mass in one of her own breasts. Thelma was ultimately diagnosed with Stage Two breast cancer.

Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2009, 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. 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. 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%.

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%. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Thelma had no family history of breast cancer but her pragmatism, coupled with her experience as a nurse, led her to obtain routine mammograms anyway. "I was diagnosed just after I came home," remarked Thelma. After her initial shock, Thelma decided to look on the

bright side of the situation. "I always had a positive attitude, and I decided that it was a good thing that I was home where it could be taken care of."

Thelma elected to have a complete mastectomy, and consequently never had to endure chemotherapy or radiation treatments. "It wasn't a hard thing for me to decide." She was selected to participate in a research project which was designed to decrease the use of chemotherapy in patients whose circumstances did not require the drug therapy. After five years of being cancer-free, Thelma is confident that she followed the right course of treatment. "I have a singular faith in God. I had a very positive experience and the people who took care of me were great. I was out walking in the neighborhood two days after the surgery." Thelma has not allowed the experience of having cancer to change her life. "I don't think about having cancer as often as I did in the beginning, you must carry on and not worry about it happening again. I love to travel. I have taken many trips with groups of teenagers back to Africa. I go bike-riding as often as I can."

Thelma counsels her family members, including her nieces, to get routine mammograms like she did. "Why be afraid of a little test that can't hurt you and could save your life? The quicker they find cancer, the better your chances of survival."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, September 12<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, 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.

Women who are interested in receiving a free mammogram are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program at Saint Clare's Hospital in Sussex. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. 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.

