

## Elective Surgery Reveals Breast Cancer



Perpetually unhappy about the size of her large chest, local resident Valerie Whritenour finally decided at the age of 52 to undergo breast reduction surgery. As a matter of protocol, the plastic surgeon sent some of the discarded tissue to a pathologist for examination. A few weeks after her elective surgery, Valerie was back in the physician's office, but this time it was for a very different reason. Breast

cancer had been detected and Valerie's situation was considered very high risk. "I tell everyone that cancer doesn't hurt. I felt fine. There was nothing for me to worry about as far as I was concerned," commented Whritenour, who had always obtained annual mammograms although she has no family history of breast cancer. "Having a mammogram doesn't hurt and I have always been very diligent about it. I understand the importance of it now!"

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%.

The cancer detected in Whritenour's original pathology report was at such an early stage, that it took multiple mammograms, ultrasounds and MRI's to locate the malignancy. Once the type of breast cancer had been determined, Whritenour had a difficult decision to make. After years of dissatisfaction with her physical appearance, she had had one month of happiness with herself. However, she quickly realized that there were many long-term risks associated with her current situation. She discussed her options with her physicians and her family, including her adult daughter who urged her to get a double mastectomy. "She is very wise. She was my sounding board throughout this whole process." Whritenour ultimately decided to undergo the surgery, which allowed her to avoid follow-up chemotherapy and radiation treatments altogether.

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.

Whritenour arranged to take a 6-week leave of absence from her job as a professional photographic retoucher to focus on her recovery. Although the tasks associated with her profession are not physically arduous, the daily commute into Manhattan and the occasional heavy lifting on the job caused her concern. "I had a lot of soreness and pain." Throughout the ordeal, Whritenour relied heavily on her family and friends for support. "These people have been my strength. I didn't know how I would make it through without them. My younger daughter asked a lot of questions. My boyfriend was like my nurse. Support and a positive attitude are what heals you."

Although Whritenour is obviously relieved that she did not have to undergo extensive post-operative treatments, she admits that she feels a bit guilty in the presence of other breast cancer survivors who have had chemotherapy, radiation or other procedures. "I am so blessed and so lucky. It almost feels as if I didn't have cancer." Whritenour is still adjusting to her new label as a breast cancer survivor. "There's a big part of me that didn't want it to define who I am, and yet, I am really proud of myself that I made it through." Her new motto is, "Be thankful for every day that you have because you never know when it could change. Life changes on a dime. Now that I am a survivor, I can tell people to get a mammogram. It saved my life."

Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program administered by the Sussex County Health Department. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are also available. 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.

