

A Mutual Diagnosis of Breast Cancer Brings Sisters Closer



Carol and Leigh Whitney hail from a close-knit family. The two sisters, along with their brother and a third sister, shared the usual experiences as they grew up together in northern New Jersey. Both Carol and Leigh are independent sorts; neither of them ever married or had children, and they both had a tendency to keep bad news to themselves, for fear of causing other family members to worry. Carol was diligent about getting annual physical exams, and she began receiving mammograms at the age of 40. Leigh, on the other hand, was hardly ever ill and rarely saw a doctor for any reason. With no history of breast cancer in their family, both sisters were stunned to be diagnosed with the disease within months of each other.

Leigh's diagnosis of Stage Three breast cancer at the age of 44 left her feeling angry with herself. "I was beating myself up because I had not been to the doctor in years. I was not diligent like that." Because of her lackadaisical approach to her health, she was ashamed to reveal her diagnosis to her family. In the meantime, Carol had been religiously receiving annual mammograms for 13 years. Her annual mammogram revealed a spot which had remained unchanged year after year. Once she learned of her sister's cancer, however, her physician elected to biopsy the area. To her surprise, Carol was diagnosed with Stage One breast cancer. Just like her sister, Carol initially elected to keep the news to herself. "I never talked about it. Only 3 or 4 people whom I worked with ever knew."

One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet the majority of them 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. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

The road to health was a rocky one for Leigh Whitney, who underwent a rigorous regimen of weekly chemotherapy treatments, followed by surgery, radiation and more surgical procedures. Her sister, Carol, was there to support her through the entire process. "Carol would drive me to the treatments and take me home. Both of my sisters were wonderful and helpful to me at that time in my life," noted Leigh. Because Carol's cancer was diagnosed at such an early stage, she managed to sidestep chemotherapy all together and elected to have daily radiation treatments for a period of 7 weeks.

Both Carol and Leigh continued to work during their treatments. Carol was employed as a teacher's assistant at a high school in Bergen County, while Leigh was working as a Customer Service Manager at a wine distributor at the time. "It helped me that I tried to work as much as I did," noted Leigh. However, Leigh eventually had to take a leave of absence from work because her treatments became too physically taxing.

Now fully recovered, both sisters are firm believers in the value of an annual mammogram. "They're not as bad as people make them out to be," notes Leigh ruefully, who was surprised by her initial experience with digital mammography. "I would much rather have a pinch and a squeeze than what I went through."

Carol admits that although she continues to get her annual mammogram, the anticipation now makes her a little uneasy. "I sweat a little bit, but I do self-exams constantly, too. I definitely recommend mammograms, because you never know. Just look at me."

Project Self-Sufficiency, in conjunction with the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®, Intercar Mercedes Benz, Sussex Honda, the New Jersey Herald, and the Sussex County Cancer Coalition have sponsored a campaign, "Mammograms Save Lives," to underscore the importance of annual mammograms to the residents of Sussex County. The effort includes flyers, billboards and newspaper ads, along with a public relations campaign.

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.

Both Carol and Leigh are regular participants in the Susan G. Komen North Jersey Race for the Cure®, which will be held this year on May 15th at the Essex County South Mountain Recreation Complex in West Orange. The race has succeeded in raising millions of dollars for breast cancer education and research. "I never was much of a pink person, but I am a fan now," laughs Carol.

Project Self-Sufficiency is sponsoring a team for interested area participants, and even providing free transportation to and from the event. To register for Team Project Self-Sufficiency, interested participants are encouraged to log onto www.komennorthjersey.org and select Team Project Self-Sufficiency.

Sharing the experience of surviving breast cancer has brought Carol and Leigh closer to all of the members of their family, particularly to their sister-in-law who is also a breast cancer survivor. "We are closer now because of going through something like this. Our communication is better now, too. We have a common bond. It's like being in an exclusive club," comments Leigh.

Project Self-Sufficiency will be offering free mammograms at the agency in June. 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.

