

Trip to Hometown Gives Strength to Breast Cancer Survivor



Registered nurse Maxcelie “Maxi” Reed worked with critically ill patients for years. Her experiences gave her a unique perspective on her own health care; for instance, she insisted that a Do Not Resuscitate document be present in all of her medical records. She was scrupulous about her diet and she exercised regularly, emphasizing yoga for its calming influence on

her stress levels. She was also meticulous about getting regular check-ups and screening mammograms. With her healthy lifestyle and no family history of breast cancer, Reed was shocked to learn that her annual mammogram had revealed a suspicious mass. Days later, on the way to her 56th birthday celebration, Reed received her diagnosis: Stage Three breast cancer. “It was such a shock. I was not prepared for it.”

After discussing the recommended surgical and treatment plans with her physician, Reed thought long and hard about her options. Years of dealing with the critically ill had made her cautious. “It was not an easy decision for me,” she explains. “I thought ‘I might make it and I might not.’” Eventually she agreed to pursue surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, but she had a special request. She wanted to return to her native village in the Philippines before she began her chemotherapy regimen. “I wanted to say ‘good-bye’ to my family and friends and make peace with some others.”

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 national 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. One out of eight women will develop breast cancer, yet about 85% of these women have no family history of the disease.

According to the New Jersey Department of Health, breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed among New Jersey women and the second leading cause of death, after lung cancer, attributed to cancer in the state. In 2015, 7,584 New Jersey women were diagnosed with breast cancer. The

rate at which new cases of breast cancer are being diagnosed in Sussex County, as well as in the rest of the state, is stable, according to the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control. The county’s breast cancer death rate is also falling, in accordance with state and national trends. However, the disease contributes to the death of 1,300 New Jersey women annually. Access to breast cancer screenings and optimal treatments is an urgent public health issue.

Reed’s trip to the Philippines did much more than bring her peace of mind. “For me, returning to my hometown gave me extra strength. If you go to a place where you are happy, you take that energy with you when you go. I knew that I had to tap into that energy and take it back with me so that I could get through this.”

Years ago, Reed contracted a rare neurological condition which caused extensive debilitation throughout her body. Physical therapy and a strict dietary regimen allowed her to make a full recovery. However, the condition posed a challenge for Reed when faced with chemotherapy. “Initially, I didn’t want to go through the treatments,” she explained. Reed reluctantly agreed to follow the recommended regimen, but experienced numerous side effects and setbacks along the way. She had to take a leave of absence from her nursing job, as well.

Now a five-year survivor, Reed still practices yoga and carefully monitors her diet. She is grateful for the life lessons she received from her experience with breast cancer. “I have become wiser. I make myself a priority and I am at peace right now.”

Free Breast Health Services Available

The New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJ CEED) 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 973-579-0570, extension 1246 or 1248. 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.

