

Local Senior Citizen's Persistence Results in Breast Cancer Diagnosis



"I want to express that the individual has to be proactive in their own self-examinations," explains breast cancer survivor Bette Schaumburg, who noticed a strange dimpling in one of her breasts at the age of 74.

With a family history of breast cancer, Schaumburg had been receiving regular screening mammograms for years. Although a questionable mass had been detected in the opposite breast many years before, there had been no malignancy and the spot remained unchanged over time. This time, Schaumburg insisted on getting a mammogram immediately, but the test yielded nothing out of the ordinary. She persisted in her belief that something was amiss and made an appointment with a breast surgeon who ordered a second mammogram and an ultrasound. Eventually, a biopsy determined that Schaumburg had Stage 3 breast cancer. Schaumburg was vindicated. "I'm not a doctor, but I can feel my own body!"

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.

Because the disease had progressed into her lymph nodes, Schaumburg's surgeon recommended a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Side effects from the treatments were minimal. "I was annoyed at how much time it all took," remarked Schaumburg. "The chemotherapy was no big deal. You sit there and get juiced up!" She passed the time playing games. "The hair loss was unavoidable, but I never lost my appetite, I was not fatigued, I didn't get sick at all, and I just went about business as usual." She purchased a wig and loved the way she looked in it, "The wig was pretty cool. I thought 'I'm not going to look this good after my real hair grows back in!'"

Schaumburg's husband, three adult sons and daughters-in-law were very supportive throughout her surgery, treatments and recovery. "I was very blessed throughout all of this. I have a strong faith in God, and He was there the whole time."

As a result of her own experience, Schaumburg recommends that women do self-exams in addition to receiving regular screening mammograms. "Don't put it off. You should examine yourself. It's advisable to just put it on the calendar and do it once a month. Don't ignore persistent pains and be aware of changes in your own body like you are aware of changes in the way your car sounds. Pay attention!"

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.

