

## Faith Sustains Woman Diagnosed with Breast Cancer



While accompanying her husband to a medical appointment one day last year, Ginny Pivko suddenly realized that she had neglected to get her annual mammogram. Pivko had always been diligent about her annual screening even though there was no history of breast cancer in her family. However, other issues with her own health had distracted her during the previous year. As a result, when she finally made it to the appointment, it had been two years since

her previous screening. Pivko took advantage of the 3D mammography techniques which had recently become available and were recommended for women with dense breast tissue. She was quite taken aback when she was contacted by her radiologist and asked to return for a second screening. She was diagnosed with breast cancer shortly thereafter.

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. However, according to a comprehensive compiled from 2006 - 2010 by the Komen North Jersey Affiliate among women in the agency's nine-county area, women in Sussex County, New Jersey, have fewer breast health screenings than women in the remaining eight counties, due to a limited understanding of breast health.

The Susan G. Komen North Jersey Affiliate, the local arm of the national organization, covers nine counties in northern New Jersey, including Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren. During 2006 - 2010, breast health screenings among Sussex County women was markedly lower at 71% versus a 79% rate of screenings in the remainder of the coverage area. The late stage diagnosis of breast cancer in Sussex County hovered at 52.8% while other counties in Komen North Jersey service area tallied a 46.1% late stage incidence of breast cancer. In addition, the county had an astounding rate of 29.5% breast cancer-related deaths per 100,000 people during the four-year period. By comparison, other counties in the agency's nine county service area had a much lower rate of 24.7%.

Education about breast health is one of the keys to turning around these trends in Sussex County. For the past five years, Project Self-Sufficiency has spearheaded a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offered free mammograms to area women via a mobile mammography unit several times a year.

Pivko is unable to work due to her ongoing health issues. Instead, she volunteers frequently at her church, St. Kateri in Sparta, where she serves as a Youth Minister. These days she is busy getting her teenage charges ready for confirmation. "If I didn't have my faith, I would not be so happy or so lucky. It means that I can look forward and have hope. I've had a couple

of tearful times, but I am stoic and realistic."

Despite having a long history of health problems, including rheumatoid arthritis and a previous diagnosis of thyroid cancer, Pivko claims, "I am resilient. I have health problems, but they don't get me down. I really have been blessed." After meeting with her team of physicians, Pivko waited two weeks before she broke the news about her diagnosis to her husband and adult son. "I did a lot of soul-searching," she says thoughtfully.

Pivko's cancer was caught extremely early. She had minor surgery, and was overjoyed to learn that a breast reduction could be included. "I said, 'Sweet! Let's do this. Life is good!'" She adds, "Surgery was awesome! I stayed overnight and was out by 9:00 a.m. the next morning." Once it was determined that her surgery was successful, she was able to skip chemotherapy altogether and begin undergoing daily radiation treatments. About radiation, she remarks, "Everybody responds differently, but for me, it's a cake walk. It really is easy."

Pivko has joined a breast cancer support group where she enjoys receiving feedback from other women in all stages of treatment and recovery. Getting the word out about the importance of early detection is paramount. "Make sure you get your annual mammogram! It saves lives," cautions Pivko.

Free mammograms will be offered on Thursday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, at the St. Francis de Sales Church in Vernon. January 26<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Mammograms will be available by appointment to uninsured women over the age of 40; some income-eligibility guidelines apply. To make an appointment for a free mammogram, call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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 or 844-807-3500.

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 973-579-0750, 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.

