

Annual Mammogram Detects Breast Cancer in Local Woman



A family history of breast cancer led Michelle Firzlaff to begin receiving routine screening mammograms at the age of 30. Both of Firzlaff's grandmothers, as well as her own mother, had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Firzlaff's scrupulous attention to her own health paid off last August, when her routine mammogram detected a malignant tumor in one of her breasts. "I freaked!"

explains Firzlaff, 46, "I have teenage kids!" She calmed herself down and declared, "I'll do whatever I have to do to get better."

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 the majority have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram.

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 2014, 7,488 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.

Upon hearing her breast cancer diagnosis, Firzlaff's immediate reaction was to request a double mastectomy, but given the early stage of the disease, her physician advised against such a radical procedure. Her diligence in paying such close attention to her health meant that the tumor was extremely small, and had not yet spread to any of her lymph nodes or surrounding tissue. Consequently, Firzlaff was able to skip chemotherapy and opt for a lumpectomy, radiation and follow-up medication. The medication, which is designed to eliminate the estrogen in her body, has slammed her into an early and immediate

menopause. "My poor husband," jokes Firzlaff, as she recounts the accompanying mood swings and hot flashes. "I don't know how he puts up with me!"

The mother of two teenage girls, Firzlaff was cautious about explaining her situation to her children. "My daughters watched my mother go through a lot. I waited to tell my kids until I knew my treatment plan. I was very honest with them." She even brought her children to the oncology facility so that they could see the radiation treatment equipment and get a greater understanding of the recovery process.

Although Firzlaff is only five months past the date of her diagnosis, she can already see a change in herself. "I don't take things for granted anymore and I'm not afraid to try new things. Life's too short!"

Given her experience, Firzlaff has very little patience for women who put off getting annual screening mammograms. "I want my story told because I want women to know they need to go for a mammogram! Early detection is key. I am living proof that if you catch it early, you're good. It takes only a few minutes."

Breast Cancer Survivors Sought for Public Relations Campaign

Project Self-Sufficiency spearheads a public education effort, "Mammograms Save Lives," and offers breast health education with the goal of encouraging local women to take a proactive role in monitoring their health. Sussex County breast cancer survivors who are willing to be profiled as part of the Mammograms Save Lives campaign are urged to call Project Self-Sufficiency at 973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500.

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.

