

Local Teacher Hopes to Educate Others about Breast Cancer



A family history of breast cancer compelled Tammy Letts' physician to recommend diagnostic mammograms for her at a very young age. "I was really lucky. My doctor was very persistent," notes Letts. It turns out that getting the mammogram was easy; convincing her insurance company to pay for it was a battle. Once that fight was won, Letts received her first mammogram at the age of 31 and was horrified to learn that breast

cancer had been detected. "If I had waited until the normal age for an annual mammogram, I would have died."

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 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.

The majority of those diagnosed with breast cancer each year have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to practice effective early detection techniques, such as annual mammograms and self-exams. 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. Recent studies have shown that mammography can reduce the chances of death from breast cancer by 30%. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Letts' breast cancer was diagnosed at an extremely early stage, so radiation and chemotherapy were not required as part of her convalescence. Instead, she underwent a lumpectomy and agreed to take tamoxifen for five years as a preventative measure. Regular follow-up mammograms and additional screenings of both breasts were recommended, and once again, flagged as inappropriate by her insurance company because of her age. After winning the battle with her insurance company, Letts learned that she had a different type of slow-growing cancer in both of her breasts. Markers were inserted and she agreed to be monitored regularly. Now 45, Letts has lived with this diagnosis ever since.

Letts is an educator in the Andover Regional School District. Almost all of her health issues happened to coincide with breaks during the school year, so she has not had to take time off from work in order to recover. However, teaching

others about the benefit of screening mammograms is an ongoing mission for Letts. "We women put ourselves last, but we need to take time for ourselves. If we don't do that, our families will be left alone. I am divorced. I raised my children. They would have been orphans."

According to data compiled recently by the Komen for the Cure® North Jersey Affiliate, almost 33% of women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County have not had a mammogram in the past year, a percentage which is marginally better than some of the other counties in the agency's 9-county service area in northern New Jersey. However, 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. The average 5-year mortality rate across all ethnic groups in Sussex County is 33.4%, almost 7 percentage points higher than the 9-county average of 26.5%.

Testing for genetic links to Letts' breast cancer turned out to be negative, but Letts is not convinced that there is not some sort of cause and effect, given her family history. Her suspicions were aroused last year when she encountered additional health issues which ultimately led to a hysterectomy. "I really advocate for every woman to have annual mammograms. I want people to know that mammograms saves lives. Getting a mammogram doesn't take much time. Mammograms are offered at several places for free. There is no reason not to get one."

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. 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.

