

# Mammogram Saved My Life, Says Harwich Port Resident

by Elizabeth Van Wye

Harwich Port resident Kathy Mingle looks, and feels, great. But nine years ago she received the first of two shocking medical diagnoses. In November 2006 she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. The second shock came three years later when she learned that she had developed a potentially life-threatening heart condition caused by the drug used in her chemotherapy regimen.

The breast cancer diagnosis took her completely by surprise. Mingle remembers that day clearly. She had always loved Harwich Port and that summer, when she retired from teaching, she and her husband Joe had moved here from Arlington.

Her annual mammogram that fall was to be routine, Mingle recalled. She was “feeling great,” running 15 to 20 miles a week, with no family history of breast cancer and no lumps or anything out of the ordinary in her regular self-exam. “I had no inkling” of what was to come,” she said. When her doctor called with the results and told her they had found cancer, “I was floored...my life flashed in front of me!”

Their son had recently married and as yet had no children. “Will I ever see my grandchildren?” she wondered as she sat quietly in her kitchen in Harwich Port.

Later that evening she was contacted by her surgeon, who was also part of the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. “He reassured me that I would not die,” she recalled, “so I breathed a slight sigh of relief.”

With her husband at her side Mingle would go through three lumpectomies to remove the mass on her right breast. The surgery was followed by chemotherapy once every other week for a year and Mingle admits the prospect was daunting. “My very first day I didn’t want to go,” she recalled. “I was scared and I didn’t know what to expect.” Her husband’s response is etched in her memory. “Kathleen,” he said. “You have to go. You have to have a beginning to have an end.”

Mingle experienced few side effects of the chemo, although she lost her hair right away. She asked her husband to shave her head – “the eight-ball treatment!” – she said with a laugh.

The chemo was followed by six weeks of radiation therapy.

That’s when shock number two arrived. Her particular type of cancer responded well to the drug Herceptin being used in the chemotherapy. However, her doctors knew there was a 5 to 10 percent chance that the drug might result in some sort of

heart problem. With that knowledge, her doctors at the cardio-oncology program at Beth Israel Deaconess were particularly concerned, according to James D. Chang, MD, director of the program. This complication “can, ironically, be more life-threatening than the cancer itself,” he said, adding, “patients undergoing certain chemotherapy and radiation treatments need to be closely monitored.”

As a result of regularly monitoring her heart function, doctors discovered that she was developing significantly reduced cardiac functioning. Her chemotherapy, which had proved effective in treating her cancer, was stopped and she started to take a combination of medications, including lisinopril and Metoprolol Succinate, to help improve cardiac function.

Slowly Mingle’s heart started to improve. Over the next two years her doctors performed multiple echocardiograms to check her progress and in December 2009 her cardiac function returned to normal. Mingle is extremely grateful to the staff at Beth Israel Deaconess and is happy to have done so well. She now has yearly checkups and has been fine ever since, her doctors say.

Nine years after her initial diagnosis, Mingle is “doing better than ever, even more active than I was before.” In spite of this she sometimes thinks of cancer as kind of a terrorist. “It’s in the back of your mind all the time – you never know where it might pop up again,” she said.

She remembers that day in November 2006 when the future was so uncertain. She also remembers what a near miss it was. Having that mammogram in a timely fashion was key. “The person who read my x rays saved my life,” she said. Mingle wants to reach out to other women to remind them to have a regular mammogram, even if they have absolutely no symptoms or family history. “It makes you realize how fast things can change.”

In the past nine years she has lived to see the grandchildren she wondered if she would ever see. In addition to playing tennis four



Harwich Port resident Kathy Mingle is more active today than prior to her breast cancer diagnosis. She urged women have regular mammograms even if they have no history of symptoms of breast cancer. COURTESY PHOTO

or five times a week, as well as golfing and working out, she and her husband enjoy spending time with their son’s family, and

especially their four young granddaughters. “I’m so fortunate to be able to experience them,” she added with a smile.

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