

## News Release

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### **IU Kokomo breast cancer survivor urges routine mammograms**

**KOKOMO, Ind.** — Sylvia Mason calls herself “the poster child for early detection.”

Mason, 52, assistant to the dean of Indiana University Kokomo’s School of Nursing, was diagnosed with breast cancer at her routine mammogram in 2009. She is now cancer free, and urges other women to stay current on their routine mammograms.

“I just cannot urge enough starting early,” Mason said. “The more history you have on film, the better chance of catching something very small, when your chances of a cure are much better.

“I was very fortunate it was caught from one year to the next. I started getting mammograms before I turned 30, because of family history of breast cancer.”

Mason’s grandmother died of breast cancer in 1981, when there were fewer successful treatment options. Her grandmother’s death made her extra vigilant about taking whatever precautions were available to her, including mammograms.

“I saw what my grandmother went through, and I wanted to make sure that wasn’t me,” she said. Her mother also had benign tumors removed, which was further encouragement to have annual testing.

When she went for a second test, she remembers her radiologist showing her the result, and saying, “This is what we’re worried about.” It was a tiny spot, about the size of a grain of salt, Mason said.

“I feel so blessed we can detect it so early, so I can look forward to a long and healthy life,” she said. “I felt at peace the moment the doctor gave me the news. I felt I was going to be OK. Because I had started mammograms so early, I knew it hadn’t been there a long time.”

Her diagnosis came shortly before her 49<sup>th</sup> birthday, which gave her perspective on her 50<sup>th</sup>.

“Some people find turning 50 to be traumatic,” Mason said. “I was ready to rock it out. I was never a birthday person before, but they are special now. When you have a disease, and you don’t know how many more birthdays you will get to celebrate, it makes them all so much more special.”

Mason’s diagnosis was stage 0 non-invasive breast cancer. One month after her biopsy, she had a lumpectomy, then started a series of 34 radiation treatments, which she did on her lunch hour. She had minimal side effects — mostly severe fatigue and burning like sunburn. Mason said she knows other women who have struggled through their breast cancer treatment, and she realizes how lucky she was to have done so well.

“I never missed a day of work,” she said. “I feel very blessed and fortunate.”

For the first two years after treatment, Mason had follow up mammograms every six months. Now she is back to her usual one mammogram per year, along with an annual check up with her surgeon and taking tamoxifen, a medication prescribed for treatment and prevention of breast cancer. Once she reaches five years cancer free, she can stop taking the medication.

Mason hopes by sharing her story she can encourage other women to take action and get a mammogram every year.

“My sister is five years older than me, and she had never had a mammogram before my diagnosis,” she said. “She went in and had one. If my cancer gets one person’s attention, and made her take action, it was worth it. You can’t be afraid to have an exam. Sticking your head in the sand doesn’t make the problem go away, if there is a problem. You’re better off knowing, so you can be part of the solution.”

She appreciated the support she received from her IU Kokomo family.

“Everyone was wonderful and rallied to support me,” she said. “You have to have some kind of support, whether it’s family, church, or your co-workers. I couldn’t have asked for a better group of co-workers during that time.”

As a survivor, Mason recently participated in the St. Joseph Hospital Pink Pancakepalooza, on the survivor’s pancake tasting panel. She takes part in Relay for Life and has done the Making Strides Walk, which is specifically for breast cancer research.

“This has become a cause near and dear to my heart,” she said. “It behooves us to be our own health advocates, and know our bodies. Breast cancer is a non-discriminatory disease. Any person can get it, and we have to find a cure, and take

steps to take care of ourselves.”

*Indiana University Kokomo serves north central Indiana.*

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