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Breast cancer education act sponsor to receive award at conference focused on hereditary links

By ELAINE MARKOWITZ
Jewish Press

For many women breast and ovarian cancers are modern scourges, and for Jewish women of Ashkenazi — Eastern European — descent, the fear of contracting these diseases is heightened by a greater risk.

The focus will be on these issues at the fifth annual "Joining Forces Against Hereditary Cancer" conference at the Lake Buena Vista Palace Hotel in Orlando from June 24-26. Some 600 people are expected to attend.



U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz

The conference is an offshoot of FORCE (Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered), a Tampa-based non-profit that seeks to educate people about hereditary breast and ovarian cancer. The program is co-sponsored by the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and University of South Florida Health.

The conference is open to everyone, but is geared toward those who have had hereditary linked cancer and "previvors" — a term originated by Sue Friedman, FORCE founder and president for men and women whose family history puts them at a high of developing cancer.

South Florida Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, herself a survivor of hereditary breast cancer, will be presented the first Spirit of Empowerment award for having introduced the EARLY Act (Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young) as part of the new national health reform package.

According to FORCE, studies have shown about one in 40 women of Ashkenazi descent carries a mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene, as opposed to one in 800 in the general population. The mutations allow cancerous tumors to grow in the breast and ovaries.

Among the 35 different sessions, plastic surgeons will deal with new modes of reconstructive surgery, while others in the medical field will share information on clinical trials,



screening, risk reduction and risk-reducing surgeries such as mastectomy (breast removal) and oophorectomy (removal of the ovaries) prior to a cancer diagnosis.

Also on hand will be those with personal stories to tell like Wasserman Schultz

Last year Wasserman Schultz found a lump in her breast that proved to be malignant. After testing positive for the BRCA2 breast cancer gene mutation, she opted to remove all breast tissue and her ovaries to prevent a recurrence.

Writing on her congressional website, she speaks openly of her experience: "Seven surgeries later I am now cancer free. I found my tumor early because of knowledge and awareness."

The EARLY Act she introduced, which is now enacted, directs the Centers for Disease Control to develop a national education campaign about the threat breast cancer poses to young women of all backgrounds. The EARLY Act also will provide grants to organizations providing women with support, counseling and prevention training.

FORCE founder Friedman, also a survivor of hereditary breast cancer, said she appreciates Wasserman Schultz's emphasis on knowledge. "Had I known about hereditary predisposition I would have made different choices," she said.

For more information, go to facingourrisk.org or call 1-(866) 288-7475.

North Center

2075 Sunnydale Blvd.
Clearwater, Florida 33775
727.736.1494
www.gmkjc.org



South Center

5023 Central Ave.
St. Petersburg, Florida 33710
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