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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.

This year the fifth annual “Joining Forces Against Hereditary Cancer” conference will focus on those issues at the Lake Buena Vista Palace Hotel in Orlando from June 24-26.

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

The conference is open to 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, as well as anyone else interested.

In addition to the information sessions, 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), which is part of the new national health reform package.

According to FORCE, studies have shown



U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz



about one of every 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 cancer 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, that is now enacted, directs the Centers for Disease Control to develop and implement a national education campaign about the threat breast cancer poses to young women of all ethnic and cultural 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.

“I was diagnosed with breast cancer 14 years ago at age 33 and I was misdiagnosed and misinformed,” Friedman said. “Had I known about hereditary predisposition I would have made different choices.”

Her experience with the disease was the impetus for founding FORCE. The first national conference was held in 2005.

“Last year 520 people attended and this year we are hoping to hit 600,” she said.

Friedman said the most popular part of the event is the “Birds of a Feather Show and Tell” room, where women can see what reconstructive surgery looks like and share their experiences.

For information on the conference see the FORCE website: facingourrisk.org. or call 1-(866) 288-7475.

MAZON to promote healthier options at food banks

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger announced it will receive a \$600,000 grant to establish a new initiative designed to address the link between obesity and hunger.

The goal of the Healthy, Options, Healthy Meals program is to strengthen the capacity of food banks to provide more fresh and nutritious food to low-income families. The program will be implemented over a two-and-a-half year period.

With data showing an alarming spike in obesity in the U.S., there is evidence tying an increase in the number of overweight Americans to poor quality diets of people facing severe economic strains. Poverty often forces individuals and families to make difficult decisions that result in the consumption of high-fat, low-cost food.

MAZON is a national non-profit that allocates donations from the Jewish community to alleviate hunger among all people.

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