

# Florida Legislator Fights for Breast Cancer Awareness Bill

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*By Brandy Bailey, ElectWomen Magazine Contributor*

**Debbie Wasserman Schultz's** concern for children and working families is what first motivated her to run for office in 1992, where she made history as the youngest woman ever elected to the Florida state legislature at the age of 26. Throughout this first race she displayed a vision and enthusiasm for the people of South Florida that allowed her to win the seat with 53% of the vote in a six-way race despite the fact that she'd only been a resident of Broward County for three years. She served in the Florida House of Representatives from 1992-2000 then went on to serve in the State Senate from 2000-2004. On January 4, 2005 Debbie Wasserman Schultz made history again when she was sworn in as the first Jewish Congresswoman ever elected from Florida.

When she arrived in Washington she already had a reputation as a force to be reckoned with. On the first day of the new 110<sup>th</sup> Congress the House Committee on Appropriations recommended that she serve as a Cardinal, and chair the Legislative Branch Subcommittee. Later, House Majority Whip James Clyburn of South Carolina selected and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi appointed her to serve as a Chief Deputy Whip. This role places her among an elite group of senior Members and Caucus opinion leaders that meet weekly to discuss long-range policy goals and key issues facing Congress. In her first term, Representative Wasserman Schultz served as a Senior Whip, the only freshman chosen to serve on the Whip team.

In addition to the recognition she has received from her colleagues Rep. Wasserman Schultz has also received a great deal of attention from the media for her work. *Campaigns and Elections Magazine* named her one of "Five Women to Watch in Congress." *Congressional Quarterly* called her "a rising star in House Democratic ranks." *Roll Call* newspaper identified her as one of six members of the House of Representatives worth watching. *Politico* newspaper identified her as one of "Six Women in the House Worth Watching." Her work has also been featured nationally in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*, among others.

Most recently she made headlines when she introduced the EARLY Act (Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act) and made public her own battle against breast cancer. The EARLY Act 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 goal of the campaign is to educate young women and to enable health care professionals to identify the specific threats and warning signs of breast cancer, which will lead to early diagnoses and saved lives.



What is most remarkable and what makes this piece of legislation particularly special to Wasserman Schultz is that throughout last year's presidential campaign where she stumped for Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and managed her own reelection campaign she kept quiet the fact that she was fighting for her life against breast cancer. During this time she underwent seven major surgeries that included the removal of her breast tissue and ovaries.

"I introduced the EARLY Act to help raise awareness of the threat breast cancer poses to all young women, and to highlight the heightened risks for certain ethnic, cultural, or racial groups," said Rep. Wasserman Schultz, sponsor of the EARLY Act. "Breast cancer is often thought of as an older women's disease. I hope the EARLY Act will help show women across the nation that breast cancer knows no boundaries."

In 2008, the American Cancer Society projected 182,460 new cases of breast cancer in women – of those it was estimated 10,000 of these women would be under 40 years of age. While the incidence of young women with breast cancer is much lower than older women, young women's breast cancers tend to be more aggressive and result in lower survival rates. In addition, certain ethnic groups – including Ashkenazi Jews and African American women under the age of 40 – have an increased risk of breast cancer.

The EARLY Act was introduced to Congress on March 26<sup>th</sup> with 299 co-sponsors and has been referred to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce for review.

For more information about the EARLY Act visit Representative Wasserman Schultz website at: <http://wassermanschultz.house.gov/earlyact>.

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1. Greg [June 1st, 2009 7:50 pm](#)

Please do not support this bill. While Rep. Wasserman is well intended, the bill would

cause more harm than good for women. Not only does the medical evidence show that self breast exams are an unsuccessful approach for women to screen themselves, teaching it to younger women who are incredibly unlikely to have breast cancer will result in a high amount of "false positives." This means they do not have cancer, but think they may have a growth. Therefore they have anxiety, go in for biopsies and other medical interventions, etc. This results in more harm being done to the women than good. A number of breast cancer groups have come out against this legislation but Rep. Wasserman will not listen. Please do not support bad practices in which Congress and not doctors make medical recommendations.

2. **Sue Friedman June 2nd, 2009 5:44 pm**

The national organization FORCE ([www.facingourrisk.org](http://www.facingourrisk.org)) endorses the EARLY Act. The act calls for age appropriate and risk appropriate education of young women. The National Comprehensive Cancer Network ([www.nccn.org](http://www.nccn.org)) is a consortium of top cancer centers including the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center (a National Cancer Institute designated comprehensive cancer center in the state of Florida) that meet annually to establish consensus guidelines on cancer management and risk. Other noted cancer centers that belong to NCCN include Memorial Sloan Kettering, MD Anderson Cancer Center, and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. NCCN guidelines recommend breast self exam for women who are high-risk for breast cancer beginning at age 18. The EARLY Act also calls for more education about risk and family history, a critical and overlooked topic. Because the EARLY Act focuses on education about the importance of family history of cancer and risk assessment, it is actually an act that will save lives!

EARLY will also provide resources and support for young women with breast cancer. This is an often overlooked population. Breast cancer in young women is often more aggressive, young breast cancer patients are at higher risk for second cancers, they have unique needs for information about fertility issues, and they have a greater likelihood of their cancer being hereditary, which means it's caused by a gene change that can be shared with other family members and passed on to children who would then also be at higher risk for cancer.

The programs through the EARLY Act would be based on evidence-based information, would be programs that would heavily involve the input of the medical experts in cancer risk, prevention, and genetics, and all materials and programs would be age-appropriate as determined by these experts. With a focus on risk-assessment and prevention, the EARLY Act will save lives of high-risk women, and it will improve the lives of young breast cancer patients. Please join FORCE in supporting this act.

3. **Sandi Sirotowitz June 3rd, 2009 9:53 am**

I am a breast cancer survivor, a carrier of the BRCA mutation and member of a family rampant with hereditary cancers. The way I found my lump was by examining myself! So, while there is controversy regarding this, it isn't invasive, requires no cost and is often how women discover a lump. It is certainly not encouraged to be the only way women should be vigilant, but why discourage its use if even a few women benefit from it?

I am also a member of FORCE and proud that this organization, which has been proactive in raising awareness about hereditary breast and ovarian cancers supports the

EARLY Act. Young women ARE being diagnosed with breast cancer. It IS more aggressive in younger women. Early detection, risk-assessment and prevention are the ways for women to have the best chance at survival. Education is key and this bill seeks to educate as many people as possible.

Help Congressman Wasserman-Schultz by supporting the EARLY Act. Help yourself, your sisters, mothers, aunts, friends by supporting the EARLY Act and join FORCE for tremendous support, education and programs that are essential to our fight against cancer.

4. admin **June 3rd, 2009 3:51 pm**

Dear Sandi and Sue,

Please visit this site, <http://www.checkyourgenes.org/>, which was developed by a friend of mine in Kentucky. She is a strong advocate for early detection as well as risk-assessment due to a history of a certain type of cancer in her family. Check Your Genes sounds like a sister organization to FORCE. I urge you to visit this site and help spread the word.

Thank you,

Kathy Groob, Publisher ElectWomen Magazine

5. **Maimah Karmo June 3rd, 2009 10:00 pm**

I am a 3 year survivor of breast cancer and I am alive because of early detection. As I write this, I can look over at my daughter who is now six and I can reach over and touch her face – because I am still here; because I found my lump in time. Tomorrow, I will enroll her in 1st grade. In the Fall, I will walk her to the door of school for the first time and watch her go in and find her way, and I will be waiting for her when she comes out of the door at 3 o'clock – because I will still be here – because of early detection. As I listen to her softly breathe next to me, I can smile. I wasn't smiling a few years ago because I didn't know I would still be here, but I am – due to early detection and life saving treatment, that other women (and men) before me, had to work for. They looked for a way when there was no way, they created awareness about a disease when there was none, they gave women around the world hope and a voice, so that we could be aware and use that voice to create change, so now, with EARLY, we will continue to do so, and carry their work forward.

Over the past three years, I've lost dozens of friends and acquaintances who were under 40 – all because they were not aware of the risks and were told that they were too young to have breast cancer. What those of you opposing this bill do not understand is that younger women are not on the same playing field as older women. Most of us, when diagnosed, were not even aware of the risks.

Cancer is a silent, unseen enemy. Unlike a visible enemy, unbeknownst to us, while we are finishing up college, planning our lives, polishing our dreams, building careers, nurturing babies, putting our little ones to sleep and looking forward to the future, there is this silent enemy that sometimes creeps into our bodies, and we have no means of

arming ourselves against it because some of you do not feel that our demographic matters enough to give it the attention it deserves. Maybe it would matter to you if it was your little girl, maybe not, but it matters to me and the girls I love. Their lives are worth passing the EARLY Act.

How can it be that it is okay to send our young women into the world without the knowledge that is power that could save their lives, when we arm soldiers with the tools they need to protect themselves when at war? If breast exams are not a successful approach, what approach can you give to us to educate and protect us against this deadly disease? What evidence-based tool can you deliver to the 11,000 young women being diagnosed and approximately 1,100 that will die, if breast self exams are not effective?

Change is not always popular, but it is often for the better. As a breast cancer survivor, advocate, coach, supporter, friend and shoulder of the young women I talk to who are going through breast cancer treatment, are at advanced stage breast cancer or metastatic, it is nothing less than heartrending to hear them say, "if only I'd found it in time". Many of them would beg to differ that they would rather not have had a bit of a scare, than to live with the fear of – not if, but when, their bodies would succumb to death from breast cancer. Then there are those who are 5, 10, 20 and 30 year survivors, who are alive to tell the story because they found their lumps in time and received treatment.

The EARLY Act is not saying that if young women do breast self exams they will not get breast cancer. It is not trying to induce fear in young women. It is doing no harm and will only do good. What it is doing is giving younger women education, awareness and some semblance of a foothold in the breast cancer landscape where there is not much of a voice for them. The EARLY Act is needed. If you don't think so, then give us another successful diagnostic tool and we'll shut up. Until then, I personally, and Tigerlily Foundation, will do everything in our power to support this bill and make young women aware of its existence.

I urge those who don't support the bill to come together with supporters to engage in a healthy discussion of the legislation. Is there certain verbiage that could be modified? Maybe. Are there aspects you may not like? Perhaps. Is there room for improvement? There could be, but we need to address them with a goal of finding a solution – a solution that will impact the lives of the young women who are our future.

When the EARLY Act passes, not only will it provide resources for younger women, it will allow the medical professionals who for so long ignored this demographic, or who were unaware of the unique risks that they face, to harness the collective number of women to do research and create the "non-existent" evidence based information that we so direly need.

It doesn't take a scientist to know that if a lump is found earlier, the better chance one has of survival. It will not take an inordinate amount of money to fund and support the programs that would fall under this legislation. It should not be that young women, some mere children, even at 21 years old, would lose their lives because they were not given very vital information that would allow them to live their dreams. Further, it should not be that a 10-year old gets diagnosed with this disease. What is going on? How many ten year olds should be diagnosed before we start to see what could become a more serious issue? It is reprehensible that anyone would try to block a bill that would empower so

many and better the lives of the young women everywhere.

The EARLY Act WILL save lives. Breast Cancer Education and Awareness for young women is not an option, it is critical, needed and I urge every mother, father, sister, friend, every daughter to take a look in the mirror and ask yourself where you would be were it not for the preventative measures, awareness and education that it took to get you through your daily lives. Then, take a look at your sleeping baby, daughter or the woman you love and imagine the world without her, because she did not receive information and tools that could save her life from a deadly disease growing in her body while she slept.

EARLY should not be about breast cancer politics or ego. It should not be about territory or money or power. It should only be about one thing – the reason we are all here in the first place – to make a difference in the lives of women, to save lives, to allow young women to have a life.

Then now, let's get on with the business of helping young women and creating a solution, EARLY, that would allow them to have the futures that they deserve.

6. Kay Wissmann June 7th, 2009 11:09 am

Breast Cancer Network of Strength also strongly supports the EARLY Act. The EARLY Act specifically aims to increase public awareness regarding the threats posed by breast cancer to young women of all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, including the particular risks faced by certain racial, ethnic, and cultural groups; and focuses on awareness of risk factors of breast cancer among young women. It also aims to achieve early detection of breast cancer among young women through community-centered informational forums, public service advertisements, and media campaigns.

The EARLY Act further reinforces our efforts to educate young women through our "Just for Teens" program. Since 1990, Breast Cancer Network of Strength has educated more than 200,000 teen girls about the importance of breast health and awareness. The notion that women should not worry about or think about breast cancer until they're 40 is misguided and dangerous. Approximately 28,000 women under age 45 are diagnosed with this disease.

Part of our mission is empowerment through information and knowledge. Informing and educating women about breast cancer is empowering not harmful.

We support this bill and we urge others to do the same.

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