

Women link up to fight breast cancer

Sharsheret founded by former U.S. Supreme Court law clerk

By Dawn Swann



Meredith Fried, with her close-cropped haircut, and her sister, Andrea Reiser



By Dawn Swann The Jewish Advocate

Meredith Fried of Needham, a 41-year-old mother of two, takes time out for our interview during one of her rare quiet moments. The kids are at school. She's phoning from her car, parked at Costco; and when I am done prying into her life, she will head into the store to restock the family supply of toilet paper and dog food and snacks for lunch boxes. Fried isn't a celebrity or politician or famous scholar, but she is a person of note. Fried is a breast cancer survivor.

Nearly one in 10 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer at some point in their lives, says the American Cancer Society. So chances are we all know someone who will be or has been stricken by the disease. When that happens, Fried and the support group for which she volunteers will be there.

Sharsheret is a national, not-for-profit organization that was founded in 2001 by breast cancer survivor Rochelle Shoretz, a former law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The group supports and educates young Jewish women who have or are predisposed to breast cancer.

Sharsheret is Hebrew for link. True to its name, Sharsheret is a peer-to-peer network that, via telephone and the Internet, connects women who are veterans in the cancer battle with those who are new to it. The program

is aimed at

women who are pre-menopausal, but welcomes participants of any age.

Fried delves into her story without hesitation and without making me feel nosy for asking such personal questions.

Her cancer was in her genes. Jewish women are more likely than others to carry the so-called cancer gene. An estimated 1 in 40 women of Ashkenazi descent have an aberration in the BRCA-1 or BRCA-2 gene, compared to 1 in 345 women in the general population, according to Sharsheret.

After her mother was diagnosed with the disease, Fried underwent mammograms every six months and genetic testing. In a couple of years, her life was turned upside down. She gave birth to her second child, lost her mother and learned she carried the cancer gene.

Fried doesn't wait for life to happen. She tells me that she was treated by "the best doctors in the world," but that "at the end of the day you have to be responsible for your own health."

Through a focus group at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, several local support groups and literature courtesy of

Sharsheret, Fried learned what it means to be a gene carrier and to have breast cancer. She sat in while her peers weighed the options of prophylactic breast surgery, the preventative removal of breasts; and of the removal of ovaries, because of potential links between breast and ovarian cancer.

Fried saw examples of breast reconstruction and listened to the stories of other women who were struggling with issues that were for her, at the time, purely academic. She met other gene carriers like herself, women waiting and wondering.

At age 38, with a toddler at home and a nursing infant, Fried and her husband decided to try for a third. Fried's doctor wanted a "clean read" MRI, so Fried took a break from nursing for three months. The MRI was her first. It showed a mass. Though as prepared as anyone could be, Fried was stunned. The dreaded moment had come. One year after learning she carried BRCA, Fried was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Pragmatic by nature and fortified by months of research and advice from fellow support group members, she didn't hesitate about what to do next: She underwent a mastectomy, a hysterectomy and reconstructive surgery. It wasn't heart-wrenching. She wasn't hysterical. She wasn't even overwhelmed.

"In this situation you kind of don't have a choice," Fried responded when I expressed my amazement. "My mom lost her life. Losing my breast was no big deal."

Fried deflects my compliments with praise for her husband who worked from home and took care of the kids. She also credits a network of friends – and her children, who "gave her strength just by being cute little innocent people."

To her kids, now 4 and 7, cancer was nothing. Each doctor visit meant a trip to Au Bon Pain and a treat or sleepovers at friend's houses. These days, their only memory of the sickness comes from pictures of Fried with no hair.

Fried said that having survived cancer makes it easier for her to sound positive as, through Sharsheret, she reaches out to women still in the thick of the fight.

"For me, being a resource for others is a wonderful way to give back, since there were so many who came before me who were so open and gracious with their time, support and insight," she said.

Fried explains that each patient reacts to cancer in her own way. Some women want total anonymity, some a friend, some just want to know how to tell their kids.

Though Sharsheret is geared toward young Jewish woman, the group does not discriminate based on age, religion or gender. What Fried likes best about Sharsheret is its holistic approach to breast cancer: focusing not just on the cancer, but the entire person. The group provides such conveniences as complimentary makeup kits for patients and activity kits for children to keep them occupied during doctor visits.

The three tenets of Sharsheret are convenience, confidentiality and professionalism. Even with the economic slowdown, grants and contributions have kept Sharsheret a free service.

Fried says the group's most important role is the woman-to-woman link, as sometimes what it takes to survive breast cancer is being cheered on by someone who already made it to the other side.

Fried, an easy talker, became quiet for a moment. I heard her sigh.

"A woman just walked by," she said. "She has the chemo fuzz. I remember being there. And that's why I want to help."

In the silence that followed, I thought about the life-and-death battles that are quietly waged in homes and carpool lines and Costco parking lots.

"I loved being bald," Fried said, snapping out of her reverie. "I didn't love the chemo, but having no hair was very liberating."

When her hair finally grew into a short, spiky pixie cut, Fried realized that she had never before received so many compliments. Short hair became Fried's badge of courage. She wears it that way still.

Fried isn't afraid that cancer will return for round two. She knows some survivors obsess about that, but she feels life is too precious to waste on fearful thoughts.

She reminds me, with just a touch of wryness, that any one of us could be hit by a bus tomorrow. She doesn't identify with being a cancer survivor. Sometimes she almost forgets she had the disease. "It's either a really good attitude," she joked, "or I'm seriously in denial."

Whichever, it works.

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