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After Cancer, Lawmaker Urges Tests

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She didn't cry on "Good Morning America." She didn't cry when she talked to the local press. But yesterday, surrounded by a sisterhood of other breast cancer survivors, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz stood looking so vulnerable and human -- so unlike a typical member of Congress -- at a lectern in a small Capitol dining room, and broke down repeatedly.

How could she not? She was telling a roomful of reporters and other strangers about having her breasts and ovaries removed. It's a remarkable story that hardly anyone in Washington knew about until a few days ago.

"I'm sorry," she said, departing from her text as her tears started. She took several deep breaths and struggled to keep reading. "I cannot end my remarks without thanking my wonderful husband . . ." More tears.

"So sorry."

Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), a rising star in her party, was there to announce legislation for a national campaign to educate the public, particularly young women and their doctors, about the need for a much earlier approach to breast cancer detection. The accepted standard of mammograms at age 40, advocacy groups say, creates a false sense of security for younger women. Other cancer survivors, some in their 30s, came to the Hill to ring the alarm, to applaud Wasserman Schultz for going public and to cry with her.

Now 42, the mother of three said she discovered a lump in December 2007 while doing a self-examination, and has since undergone seven major surgeries. She kept the illness private while campaigning for reelection and stumping nationwide for presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, then Barack Obama. She didn't want the illness to "define" her, Wasserman Schultz said. Most of her staff didn't know about her condition, according to a spokesman.

Wasserman Schultz said that after learning she was at greater risk for the cancer to spread because of her Ashkenazi Jewish descent, she elected to have a double mastectomy, as well as the removal of her ovaries.

Her legislation, which seeks \$9 million annually, has one of those memorable acronyms only members of Congress can invent: the EARLY (Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young) Act.

"The EARLY Act will encourage young women to be their own voice -- to speak up for themselves and know when they need to go to their doctor," Wasserman Schultz read from her statement. "The EARLY Act will teach both young women and medical professionals alike about risk factors, warning signs of breast cancer and predictive tools such as genetic testing that can help women make informed decisions about their health."

The legislation would direct the Department of Health and Human Services to begin educational campaigns in high schools and universities. It has a particular focus on ethnic minorities such as young African American and Jewish women, who are at higher genetic risk.

After Wasserman Schultz's scripted remarks gave way to uncontrolled tears, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), the act's co-sponsor, provided an emotional rescue of sorts, hugging her fellow lawmaker at the lectern. Although she campaigned frequently last year with Wasserman Schultz, Klobuchar said she had no idea the Floridian was "fighting for her life." "I can't even begin to say how proud I am of Debbie."

Klobuchar said she heard the news from Wasserman Schultz on Wednesday, when Wasserman Schultz asked her to be Senate co-sponsor of the legislation. Rahm Emanuel, President Obama's chief of staff, called the congresswoman Sunday after she released the news to two South Florida papers. And Clinton, now secretary of state, phoned at 1:45 p.m. yesterday to offer support -- 15 minutes before the news conference began.

One of Wasserman Schultz's housemates in Washington, Rep. Melissa Bean (D-Ill.), was among the few who were privy to the secret. Bean also wept openly as she spoke, dabbing her tears with a pink tissue.

So for an hour or so, at least, it was okay to publicly cry on the Hill. Legislative staffers did it. There were misty eyes among the breast-health advocates from the Tigerlily Foundation, Susan G. Komen for the Cure and the Young Survival Coalition, among others, who marshaled forces to pass out literature and tell their stories.

Afterward, off to the side of the room, Wasserman Schultz, a petite dynamo of blond curls, gathered herself. She greeted advocates and a few reporters. Her eyes were dry; she had put her political armor back on, and there was an important message to convey: "I'm healthy," she said, "and I'm through it."

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