

Sisters-in-law to run in mom's memory

Sharsheret supports Jewish women facing breast, ovarian cancer

By Rachel Gross Weinstein

When Beri Schwitzer laces up her sneakers to run the New York City Marathon next month, she will achieve many goals: completing 26.2 miles, honoring her late mother-in-law, Marsha, and spreading awareness of breast and ovarian cancer.

Schwitzer and her sister-in-law, Eve Schwitzer Merrill of Austin, are running the Nov. 3 marathon with Team Sharsheret. Sharsheret is a national non-profit organization supporting young women and their families of all Jewish backgrounds who are facing any stage of breast or ovarian cancer. Schwitzer and Merrill have each raised more than \$5,000, which will benefit



Photo: Courtesy of Beri Schwitzer

Pictured from left at the ZOOMA half marathon in Austin last March are Rachel Chaput, Eve Schwitzer Merrill and Beri Schwitzer. Merrill and Schwitzer are running the New York City Marathon on Nov. 3 with Team Sharsheret in honor of their mom and mother-in-law, Marsha.

the organization.

Marsha died of ovarian cancer in October 2011. Not only is completing a marathon a personal accomplishment for Schwitzer,

but running with Merrill makes it even more special.

"I always say that while Marsha

see **MARATHON**, p.22

Sharsheret provides many resources to those fighting breast and ovarian cancer

Sharsheret was founded in November 2001 by Rochelle Shoretz, a former law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Shoretz recognized the need for a breast cancer organization sensitive to the cultural concerns of young Jewish women and their families, after her own diagnosis at age 28.

Since its founding, Sharsheret has responded to more than 23,000 breast and ovarian cancer inquiries. The organization has gained more than 1,400 peer supporters and presented more than 250 educational programs nationwide. In 2010, Shoretz was appointed to the Federal Advisory Committee on Breast Cancer in Young Women under the auspices of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That same year, recognizing the need for specific support for those facing ovarian cancer, Sharsheret launched a national ovarian cancer program.

Sharsheret works with other groups nationwide to establish local breast and ovarian cancer support programs. Everyone, however, can access all services and programs regardless of location.

Jewish Family Service in Dallas and Baylor Regional Medical Center of Plano are partner organizations with Sharsheret. JFS provides a breast cancer support group, and

various other breast and ovarian cancer groups have been formed in the area. Sharsheret also offers free webinars, a live chat, booklets and brochures, a breast cancer survivor kit and a list of various organizations to help women and their families.

Sharsheret is partnering on Oct. 25 and 26 with NEXT: A Division of Birthright Israel Foundation, to host Birthright Israel alumni Pink Shabbat.

Invite friends for a Friday night dinner or Saturday afternoon brunch, and NEXT will provide a "Shabbox" and some funds to cover the cost of food for your guests. Sharsheret will also help out by providing free breast cancer educational resources, pink giveaways and a pink challah recipe.

For more information about all of Sharsheret's resources, visit www.sharsheret.org.

MARATHON

continued from p.3

didn't give me life, she taught me how to live," said Schwitzer, who is the director of volunteer services at Jewish Family Service. "I have been dealing with my own health issues for a long time, and it was my mother-in-law who always gave me hope. After she died, I started a weight loss journey; I've lost 90 pounds and began running again. This got me to find my 'sole,' and doing this with Eve, who I have a wonderful relationship with, is even better."

Schwitzer was a runner in high school and college, but came down with autoimmune problems that prevented her from running. After watching Marsha battle similar challenges, Schwitzer decided to change her life by altering her eating habits and becoming active again.

She has been training for the marathon four to five times a week, while battling Crohn's disease and Celiac disease. In March, she and Merrill completed the ZOOMA half marathon in Austin and ran a 5K race in Arlington in September with the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition.

Although training can sometimes be demanding, Schwitzer knows that her hard work will pay off.

"This has affirmed the way I've changed my life," she said. "The fact that I've gotten off the couch, have fought through pain and fevers to train and raised so much money is incredible. When I first laced up my tennis shoes, I was angry that I lost my mom, but now I feel like this is the greatest gift she could have given me."

Raising public awareness of breast and ovarian cancer is also what motivated the women to participate with Team Sharsheret,

Schwitzer said. According to Sharsheret statistics, one in 40 Ashkenazi women carries a gene mutation that increases the risk for breast cancer and ovarian cancer; both Schwitzer and Merrill have seen other members of their families battle the diseases as well.

Schwitzer said she hasn't set a specific goal for how long it will take to complete the marathon — just finishing and knowing Marsha is looking down will provide her strength. The entire experience has been life-changing for her.

"If I have to crawl over the finish line, I will do whatever steps I can in her memory," she said. "Another thing that gives me strength is making people aware of Sharsheret. The sad truth about ovarian and breast cancer is that Jewish women are affected at a much higher rate. People have reached out to me telling me that I'm inspiring, but I didn't really do anything. I woke up one morning and decided to change the way I live, because I knew that's what Mom would have wanted for me."

Added Merrill: "I've been running for three and a half years, and my mom was a major part of helping me get healthy again. Between the half marathon and a 5K I did with my mom, this will be one of the most important races I've ever done. I will always think of my mom and while she won't be there, the rest of my family will. Beri and I have become so close over the years, too, and running has brought us closer. This is one of the most amazing, exciting, meaningful things I've ever done."

For more information about Schwitzer's story and to donate, visit <http://sharsheret.donorpages.com/NYCINGMarathon2013/BeriSchwitzer/>.