

## HEALTH

## Harriet Hollander speaks out about her family's fight with breast cancer

By Harriet P. Gross

An array of adjectives adequately describing Elizabeth Prostic would include: beautiful; intelligent; vibrant; ambitious; accomplished.

But it would necessarily also have to include the dreadful word "dead." Because Lizzie Prostic passed away March 31 of this year. At the unfulfilled age of 31, breast cancer claimed her life, a sobering reminder that there are indeed gene defects that come down most heavily on Jews of Ashkenazi origin.

Lizzie's aunt, Harriet Prostic Hol-

lander, tells her family story in the hope that others may learn from it.

A native of Baltimore, Hollander has lived in Dallas since 1976, and here, 20 years ago, she underwent a double mastectomy. Although the breast cancer diagnosis is always a shock, it didn't exactly come as a surprise: "There was a lot on my mother's side," Hollander says. In fact, her mother had had breast cancer herself, so did one of her mother's sisters, and so did a trio of sisters who were her mother's cousins. One of those three died of

the disease, and another passed away from ovarian cancer, which Hollander terms "a spinoff of breast cancer."

The spark for the genetic testing that identified the gene defect link in the Prostic family came from Barbara, daughter of one of those sisters. Diagnosed with breast cancer herself in her late 50s, she "was hell-bent on testing," according to Hollander, becoming the first in the family to go through the procedure.

BRCA 1 and BRCA 2 are the two genes identified as sites on which the Ashkenazi defect may be found. Hollander's cousin Barbara tested positive; so did two of her daughters, both in their late 20s at the time. With the results in, these two young women chose to have prophylactic mastectomies. Their brother (yes, men can carry the gene defect as well as women) has not yet been tested, but will be soon. A third sister has tested negative.

This branch of the Prostic family lives in suburban Washington, D.C.,

and had its testing at a genetics facility there. But testing can be done anywhere. Hollander was tested in Dallas; her results, like all others from family members tested, have been sent to the same laboratory in Salt Lake City.

Testing is still a sensitive issue for many people. Some fear future employment and/or insurance problems if they have negative test results; others would rather just not know what might lie in store for them. But for all who choose testing, even those who want to know and have no fears, the procedure is the same. A consultation with a genetic counselor is required first; only after that, with full agreement from the prospective test subject, is a blood sample drawn. Then, before any results — be they positive or negative — are divulged, the person tested must have a second counseling session.

Hollander's mother was one of 10 children, including six girls. One of the mother's nieces died of colon

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## Getting tested for BRCA 1 and BRCA 2

The W.H. and Peggy Smith Baylor Sammons Breast Center is a source of genetic counseling and testing for residents of North Texas.

According to the Center, people of Ashkenazi Jewish background who have had breast or ovarian cancer themselves, or whose families have histories of these cancers, may benefit from genetic testing. Other appropriate candidates of all backgrounds include families in which two or more women have been diagnosed with breast cancer before age 50...women whose breast cancer was diagnosed when they were 40 or younger, even if there is no family history...people with personal or family histories of ovarian cancer (at any age), bilateral breast cancer, or male breast cancer...or people who have had both breast and ovarian cancer themselves, or who have both of these cancers in their families.

The Center's Hereditary Cancer Risk Program provides information and education about cancer risks and genetic mutations, construction and analysis of family trees, genetic counseling, and genetic testing if deemed appropriate. Personal and family histories and risk factors are reviewed and discussed during a first appointment; each participant receives a risk summary, and a monitoring plan tailored to that personal risk level. High-risk participants also receive information about clinical trials, in areas of disease prevention and detection, for which they may be eligible.

Further information on the Baylor Sammons Breast Center and its Hereditary Cancer Risk Program, located at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, is available by calling (214) 820-9600 or (800) 4BAYLOR (800) 422-9567.

Becky Althaus, genetic counselor in Baylor's program, is also available at Presbyterian Hospital, Dallas, several times each month. Call (214) 345-8365 for full information.

Kristin Shelby counsels at UT Southwestern Medical School, Dallas; Linda Robinson is among counselors from this center who are also available in Fort Worth. Call (214) 648-1919 for more information.

Myriad Genetic Laboratories in Salt Lake City, Utah, is the country's only commercial lab for genetic testing; all blood samples from every United States testing and counseling program, including the three centers above, are processed there.

—H.G.

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Lizzie Prostic with her daughter Harper and husband Mike Lundblad



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## Rosh Hashana in Shanghai

By Red Goldstein

SHANGHAI, China — Experiencing Rosh Hashanah at one of the few Jewish houses of worship in the People's Republic of China is an act of international unity at its best. My son, Andy Goldstein who lives in Nanjing, China, and I joined fellow Jews from all over China and other countries at the Shanghai Jewish Center, a Chabad-sponsored institution. Just getting there was a challenge since it sits in a compound behind a gate with other small buildings and is unmarked. It seems putting the name of your religious institution for all to see is not such a good idea in this officially atheist nation. Despite the unbridled capitalism and freedom to create commerce, religion has not been included in the things the

Communist Party of China wishes to promote.

Once inside the three-story nondescript white stucco villa that houses this Jewish outpost, we found a lively group on the entry level floor preparing a kiddush luncheon replete with salads, salmon, honey, and several desserts. Downstairs, past the ongoing remodeling, two dozen women sat on the left side of the mechitza and five dozen men sat to the right. Looking over the crowd, we could see all manner of dress from coat and tie, student grunge, fuzzy orthodox hats, traditional Chinese dresses, sportswear to Mao jackets. Little children running through the place reminded us of any Chabad house, except that the multi-ethnic mix of redheads, Chinese/Jewish, African and

North American and European looking kids reflected the international flavor of the crowd. Services were held in Australian-accented English punctuated by Spanish, Hebrew, French, and I don't-know-what else chatter among the congregants. The Chinese employees running the kitchen barked out orders to each other in Mandarin and local Shanghai dialect while the multi-national crowd kept translating thoughts for

each other at the kiddush luncheon. Moroccan businessmen explained their clothing manufacturing processes in Spanish and French to Spanish importers while Israeli consulate staff explained in Hebrew and English to Chilean toy importers some intricacies of getting through Chinese red tape. Like any Jewish gathering, there was plenty of "Jewish Geography" going on, but this time it wasn't "who in Fort Worth knows who in

San Antonio." The South African from Durban living in Hubei Province asked the Canadian from Montreal living in Guongzhou Province who they knew in Shanghai!

Next time you happen to be in China, I highly recommend this stop-off to the ultimate mix of international Jewish life. And, you'll even get some good travel tips along with a darn good parsha and a kosher meal!

## FAMILY

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cancer, and Hollander herself has two first cousins who had breast cancer; in fact, one of them died last year from the disease.

When Hollander found her own breast lump, she was a divorced woman living alone. "I did it all on my own," she said. "I made the appointments myself. I was never 'sick.' And I never kept it a secret." But she didn't want her parents to find out. It was her brother, a Kansas City physician, who insisted they had the right to know, and he told them himself, reporting that Hollander wasn't upset, that she didn't need pampering or coddling. But her mother felt guilty, although Hollander maintains that "My mother didn't give me breast cancer. She can't 'take credit' for that." Still, "Obviously, my mother had the [defective] gene," Hollander opines, "although we don't have any DNA to prove it."

Hollander later decided on testing for herself, and encouraged her daughter, who lives in California, to do the same. The results for both were negative. Hollander was tested a second time, to be sure; again, her results were negative. But given her personal prior history, these results prompted further concern rather than relief: there's the possibility she has a defective gene that hasn't been discovered yet.

Her brother, Lizzie's father, has been found positive for the same gene mutation as the cousins who were tested earlier. And Lizzie's blood was drawn on the day she died; she too tested positive.

Elizabeth Prostic and her hus-

band, Mike Lundblad, became parents of a baby girl on June 10, 2004 — their fourth anniversary. But Lizzie, who was then a professional staffer on Capitol Hill and a nighttime law student at George Washington University, didn't even live long enough to celebrate her daughter's first birthday. She was diagnosed with Stage 4 metastasized breast cancer that August, and "it was six months from diagnosis to death," Hollander says. Lizzie's many friends honored her by wearing her favorite things, red shoes and pearls, at her funeral, and a few weeks later fielded "Team Lizzie" in their area's Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. Her law degree has been granted posthumously.

For Hollander, Lizzie's death is the hardest of all the family cancers to accept. "The truth of the matter is, I'm a failure," she has said. "I've talked so much publicly about breast cancer awareness, and then my niece died of it. She was feisty. A fighter. She had her whole life in front of her. Why her?"

But the truth actually is that Hollander is far from a failure. The Ashkenazi gene defect determined the "why" of Elizabeth Prostic's disease, and it was Hollander herself who came forward and suggested that the *Texas Jewish Post* tell her family's story. This way, she continues to speak out about breast cancer awareness, particularly to those of Ashkenazi descent who might now look with new understanding at their own family health histories, make connections, and choose the knowledge that testing may provide.

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