

2004 Health Walk Raises Breast Cancer Awareness in Armenia



Health Walk participants, led by U.S. Ambassador John Evans, his wife Donna and MP Hranush Hakobian climb towards the Madenataran - the museum of ancient Armenian manuscripts.

By Tatevik Koutanjyan

YEREVAN, ARMENIA: On October 16, 2004, the streets of Yerevan were once again flooded with people in white t-shirts with pink ribbons as balloons filled the clear autumn sky. For the ninth consecutive year, participants of the Annual Health Walk, organized by the Armenian American Wellness Center (AAWC), hit the streets of Yerevan to raise breast cancer awareness and celebrate women's health in Armenia. The crowd included hundreds of women who have received mammography screenings at the Wellness Center as well as breast cancer survivors, medical students, physicians, reporters, students and teachers from local schools, guests from the Armenian Diaspora and AAWC staff members and their families. Many dignitaries and representatives of the foreign diplomatic corps also joined

the Health Walk. Among them were U.S. Ambassador to Armenia John Evans and his wife, Donna, British Ambassador Thorda Abbott-Watt, Lebanese Ambassador Gabriel Geara, representatives of the USAID-Armenia Mission, guests from Ireland and representatives from several international organizations.

The Armenian American Wellness Center has screened over 60,000 women since its establishment in April 1997 and has helped to save the lives of over 1,500 women through early detection and treatment of their breast or cervical cancer. The Wellness Center was initially established in response to the alarming increase of breast cancer cases in Armenia and the critical need for the accurate and early detection of the disease. In June 2001, gynecology and pathology departments were also added and in April 2004, primary health care services were offered

to patients for the first time.

AAWC has operated a satellite clinic in the suburbs of Yerevan since April 2000, and a second satellite clinic was opened in July 2003 in the town of Gavar, located in the Gegharkunik District near Lake Sevan. In addition to mammography and basic gynecological services, the Gavar Clinic also provides American style primary health care services for the entire family. The AAWC also coordinates monthly medical outreach missions to regions of Armenia outside of Yerevan and Gavar. As a result, hundreds of women receive free of charge breast ultrasounds and Pap smears every month.

Thanks to the support that AAWC receives from grassroots donors in the U.S., the Wellness Center is able to provide cancer-screening services at significantly reduced rates throughout the year. However, to promote the

services offered at the Center and to encourage more women to seek preventive screening, the AAWC offers a further discount of 50 percent on screening services during the month of October, International Breast Care Awareness Month. In addition to reduced screening rates, AAWC also organizes multiple educational events culminating in the Health Walk.

As in previous years, the 2004 Health Walk began at the doorsteps of the Armenian American Wellness Center

nian Parliament and chair of the Standing Committee on Science, Education, Culture and Youth Issues of the National Assembly of Armenia, greeted the guests and announced the official beginning to the Health Walk. She expressed her deepest gratitude to the governments of the Republic of Armenia and the United States for their continued support of the Wellness Center. She shared with the crowd the milestones that the Center has reached since its beginning and stressed that the psychological and social barriers to breast and cervical cancer screening, which previously hindered women from receiving preventive health care services, are continuously being deconstructed, and that women no longer fear coming to the Center. "The Center did not earn the trust of the public overnight," said Mrs. Hakobyan, "it required the dedication and hard work of everyone involved. It is through the provision of high quality services, the utilization of the latest equipment and supplies, the highly qualified doctors and the heartfelt care provided



Lebanese Ambassador to Armenia, Gabriel Geara (on the left), congratulates Health Walk organizers and participants for their support of Breast Cancer Awareness with the assistance of his assistant and translator, Hovig.

and ended at the Madenataran, the museum of ancient Armenian manuscripts. All major Yerevan media outlets covered the Health Walk. Special information packages were distributed to media representatives with fact sheets about AAWC and the Annual Health Walk. With the extensive coverage of the Health Walk in all major news sources in Armenia, the Center's message about the importance of early breast cancer detection reached a broader public.

Co-founder of AAWC, Mrs. Hranush Hakobian, Ph.D., member of the Arme-

to each and every patient that has made the Wellness Center one of the most prominent health care institutions in Armenia. Today, it enjoys the respect of medical professionals in Armenia and receives the highest praises from the international community. However, what is most important is that it has earned the trust of the women of Armenia, who come to the Center for their everyday health needs." Mrs. Hakobian also thanked Rita Balian, co-founder of AAWC, and the Armenian American Cultural Association, U.S. sponsor of

Among the many participants of the 2004 Health Walk were representatives from the U.S. Embassy and the Armenian Diaspora. Left to right are: AAWC Co-Founder and member of the Armenian Parliament, Hranush Hakobian; British Ambassador Thorda Abbott-Watt; Donna Evans, wife of U.S. Ambassador to Armenia; Nicholas Bruno from USAID/Armenia; U.S. Ambassador John Evans; Jenia Aidinian Rezaieh of Los Angeles, President of FCHA.

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the Wellness Center, for their dedication to the cause and continued financial, organizational and moral support.

US Ambassador to Armenia, H.E. John Evans, also addressed the participants of the Health Walk and greeted everybody in Armenian. "October is International Breast Care Awareness Month and it is very important that Armenia is joining the U.S., Great Britain, Lebanon and many other countries in their fight against breast cancer," said Ambassador Evans. "Breast cancer is not just a woman's issue; it is also a man's issue. Each one of us has a woman to thank for our very lives and we still have a lot to do to protect the health of our wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. I congratulate the Armenian American Wellness Center and the Armenian American Cultural Association for their great work and I am convinced that the Annual Health Walk will continue to raise awareness for breast cancer prevention in Armenia. Through our joint efforts we will move towards improving the quality and accessibility of women's health care."

British Ambassador to Armenia, H.E. Thorda Abbott-Watt, addressed the gathering next and greeted the crowd in Armenian as well. She congratulated all the participants, said that she was proud to be part of the Health Walk, and pledged to continue to support the effort to raise breast cancer awareness in Armenia. She also mentioned how exciting it was to see so many men among the participants. "I know many Armenian women who are involved in politics and diplomacy. The women who are being saved today by the work of the Wellness Center could become tomorrow's ambassadors and politicians," said Ambassador Abbott-Watt. "Dear women, please remember that you are needed not only by your families, but also by your country and your nation."



Schoolchildren from Yerevan and the surrounding suburbs holding signs and balloons participate in the Health Walk in support of Breast Cancer Awareness.

Taking the stage, Lebanese Ambassador H.E. Gabriel Geara asked everybody to give a warm round of applause to Mrs. Hranush Hakobian and all those who made the event a success. He extended a special thanks to AAWC co-founder, Mrs. Rita Balian. "In Beirut and all over Lebanon, International Breast Care Awareness Month is celebrated with health walks just like this one and today you are representing the future strength and unity of the Armenian nation."

Several school directors participating in the Health Walk also addressed the crowd. They thanked the Wellness Center for providing screening for all of their teachers free of charge and mentioned that they are encouraged with the growing number of parents who join their children for the Health Walk each year.

Following the speeches, schoolchildren took the stage

to perform and for more than an hour, Health Walk participants enjoyed the show. Children participate in the Health Walk every year and their participation is intended to serve as a call to their mothers, aunts and grandmothers to take care of themselves with annual check-ups and preventive screenings. Their cheerful songs and dances were a perfect end to an inspiring day. Everybody left the event excited and motivated to spread the message about the importance of early breast cancer detection.

The Armenian American Wellness Center is sponsored by the Armenian American Cultural Association (AACA); a U.S. based non-profit organization in metropolitan Washington, DC. The AACA was established in February 1995 with the original aim of fostering a greater understanding and strengthening of cultural ties between the people of the newly independent

Republic of Armenia and the United States through cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges and humanitarian projects. Since 1996, due to the ever increasing need for health care services for the women in Armenia, health-related humanitarian projects have dominated

AACA's agenda.

For more information concerning the Armenian American Wellness Center (AAWC), contact AACA by phone at 703-416-2555 or by e-mail at info@aacainc.org.



Teenagers on bicycles lead the Health Walk with AAWC Co-Founder Hranush Hakobian and U.S. Ambassador John Evans in the background.



Children participate and perform at the Health Walk every year in support of the work of the Armenian American Wellness Center and to encourage more and more women to realize the importance of the preventive health care services provided by the Wellness Center.