



IN MEMORY OF BELLA ABZUG

In 1992, I had the honor and pleasure of meeting Bella Abzug at a One-In-Nine breast cancer meeting in Nassau County. Months after that meeting, I received a phone call from her. She asked that I come to City Hall and bring the breast cancer map that was done in my home in 1992 with the help of volunteers with and without breast cancer. She was very impressed with the work we did, and could not believe the high rate of breast cancer in West Islip that was recorded on the map. This map may have prompted her to get a mammography since she had spent much time on Long Island. Three months later, she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

I also got a phone call from her to join her and the Foundation on Economic Trends to oppose an application of patenting a breast cancer gene (BRCA 1) by Myriad Genetics, a Utah biotechnology company which has developed a costly screening test to detect mutations of BRCA 1. "Human genes are not for sale or private profit," she said at a Washington, D.C. press conference on May 21, 1996. The coalition called for federal legislation to protect genetic privacy and ensure non-discrimination by employers and insurance companies.

In a letter published in The New York Times on May 26, 1996, Ms. Abzug wrote: "Any attempt to patent the breast cancer gene mutation, which appears to play a role in only 5% of breast and ovarian cancer cases, is a diversion of funds and focus from much-needed prevention programs. We have a choice: continue to spend billion of taxpayers' money on genes, which we can't change, or put more money and effort into the environment, which we can."

When I arrived in Washington to meet her, she asked me to speak at a press conference along with Betty Friedan, Jeremy Rifkin and two professors from Harvard University. I was so impressed with her dedication to women's rights and health issues.

I have been on many television programs with her, the most recent being "Rachel's Daughters" that was aired on HBO this past October. She was a true fighter for women and a role model for more. She will be missed by many.