

Lamorindans Learn about Tough Cancer Problem

By Laurie Snyder

“Cancer is still a word that strikes fear into people’s hearts, producing a deep sense of powerlessness. But today it is possible to find out through a blood test whether you are highly susceptible to breast and ovarian cancer, and then take action.” – Angelina Jolie

The ever beautiful and oft-controversial humanitarian and Oscar winner, Angelina Jolie, recently lit a fire with those words in a May 14 New York Times op-ed piece, “My Medical Choice.” Receiving news from physicians that she was at 50 and 87 percent risk, respectively, for ovarian and breast cancer from a genetic mutation, she elected to undergo a preventive double mastectomy.

But while the spotlight on Jolie raised awareness, says Rabbi Dovber Berkowitz, it also caused confusion and intensified debate about what’s best for women. For example, 1 in 40 women of Ashkenazi Jewish descent carry a BRCA gene mutation similar to Jolie’s – compared to about 1 in 400 in general, says the Jewish Learning Institute (JLI) rabbi from Contra Costa County. Potentially, these women have a 50 to 80 percent risk for breast cancer as early as their 20s and a 20 to 40 percent risk for ovarian by their 30s. Ovarian cancer is often deadlier though, he notes, because medical tests rarely diagnose before the disease reaches stage three or four.

Dr. Wendy Rubinstein, director of the National Institute of Health’s genetic testing registry, believes genetic testing for all women of Ashkenazi Jewish descent could save 2,800 lives each year. Yet other healthcare providers view such testing and resulting prophylactic procedures as going too far too fast.

To help clear this fog and celebrate National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, JLI presented a program Oct. 22 at the Lafayette Library, “An Ounce of Prevention: BRCA, Genetic Testing, and Preventive Measures.” Speakers reviewed the biblical requirement to safeguard one’s health, whether it requires Jews of Ashkenazi descent to test for mutations, and what Jewish law says about radical procedures for those testing positive for BCRA-1 or 2.

“Some 1,500 years ago when rabbinic scholars wrote the Talmud, they didn’t have questions about screening for cancer genes like we have today,” observes Berkowitz. “However, there are guiding principles found in the Talmud that can help us determine how to respond to these very perplexing and life-altering medical quandaries. One of the Talmud’s most important lessons that must guide our response is that saving one life is like saving an entire world.”

The class was the first of a new JLI series, “Life in the Balance.”

“Le Week-End” (2013)

By Leonard Pirkle



Jim Broadbent and Lindsay Duncan in Le Week-End Photo provided

The 16th California Independent Film Festival opens with a fun little film, “Le Week-End,” that will resonate with the particular demographics of this geographic region and the CAIFF audience in particular. The need for married professionals to reconnect after years of marriage, family and career is a common theme for those finding themselves suddenly in mid-life or “empty nesters.” This film tells the story of a British couple who return to Paris for a second honeymoon but much like similar films, what ensues is not necessarily what was planned or hoped for.

Starring a wonderful cast led by Jim Broadbent (“Harry Potter”) and Lindsay Duncan, a well-known British actress who has been seen in numerous productions from “Alice in Wonderland” to HBO’s “Rome” a few years ago, with a memorable guest appearance by Jeff Goldblum, scene stealer from too many films to mention, including “Jurassic Park,” “Independence Day” and one of this writer’s favorites – “The Big Chill.” The revelations, confrontations and surprises that unfold during this compressed week-end trip to reconnect are at times shocking, but never dull or predictable.

This independent film is lifted to a level above most film festival fare by the locations, writing and superb acting. The dialog and delivery is rapid paced but sharp, funny and at times quite cutting, much like we imagine our own dialog could be if we thought a little more before speaking. In the hands of these professionals it seems very natural and not delivered from a script – even one as well written as this.

There are a few scenes that will not be appropriate for younger audiences, but mature experienced film goers will enjoy the tempting and teasing of things not necessarily graphically displayed – enough said. For those who enjoy Paris, this will bring back some memories and hopefully a desire to return. For those who have not been to Paris – well, what are you waiting for?

Take a chance, buy a ticket and experience a good film that you will not likely have a chance to see in the theaters. Support your local film festival and be a supporter of the arts and the exhibition of someone’s hard work and passion.

For more information regarding this film and others at the 16th California Independent Film Festival, please go to www.caiff.org – get your tickets early as we expect this event to sell out. Au revoir.

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