

no laughing matter

FRAN DRESCHER SPEAKS OUT ABOUT CANCER

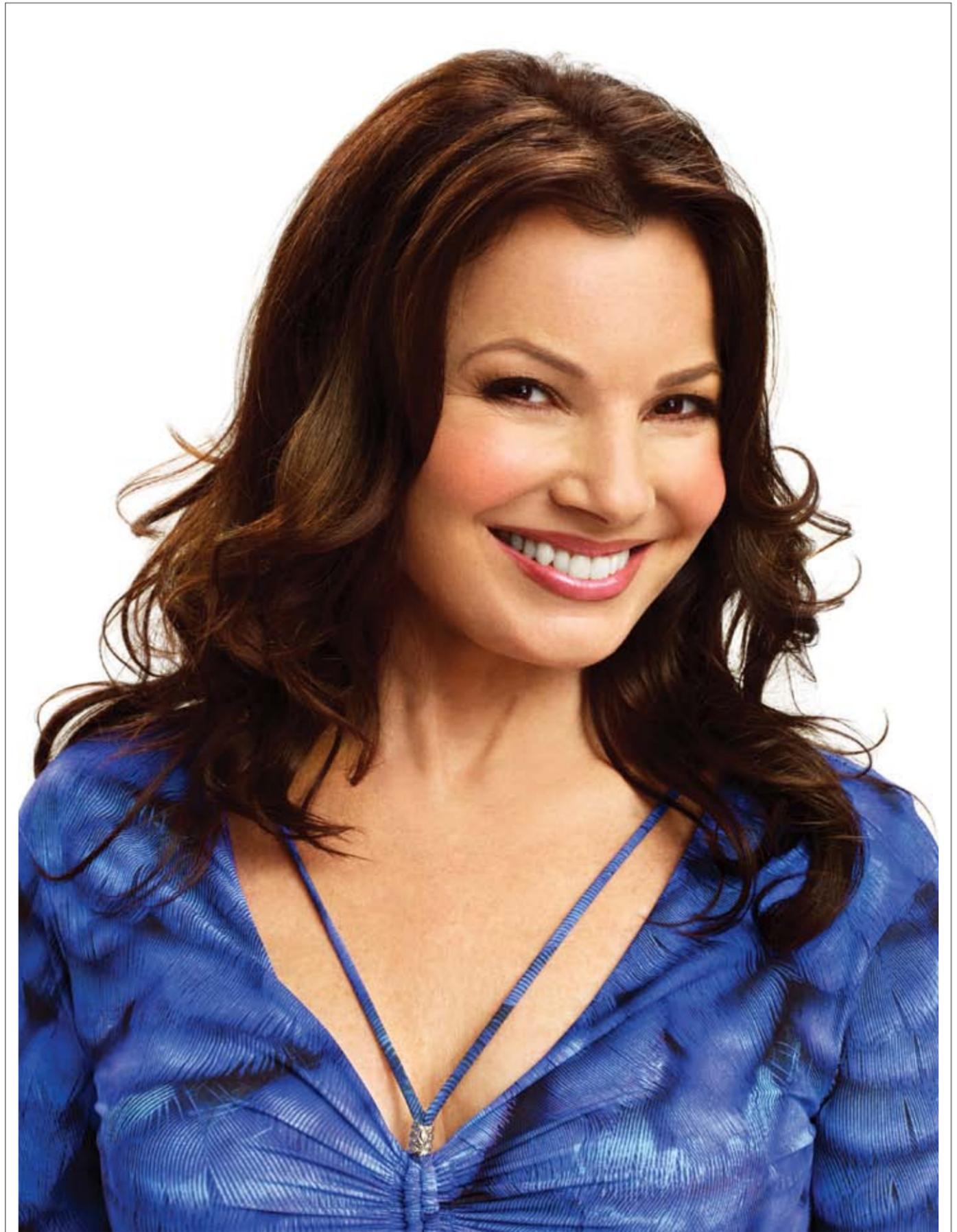
by April Dawn Ricchuito

■ Everyone's favorite flashy girl from Flushing, Fran Drescher is well known onscreen for her unique voice and her infectious laugh; one could even say that she's famous for being funny. Offscreen, however, the star of *Happily Divorced* lends her famous voice to a very serious cause that is no laughing matter: reforming healthcare in America and across the globe. She's now serving as a public diplomacy envoy for women's health issues for the US State Department, where she has assisted in launching lifesaving legislature. She's also set out to change the conversation about cancer by starting her own nonprofit organization, Cancer Schmancer, which focuses on early detection and prevention.

Drescher's passionate activism is fueled by personal experience. In her book, *Cancer Schmancer*, she chronicles her cancer. Although she's now cancer-free, dealing with the diagnostic process could have been fatal, as it took two years of testing and eight different doctors before she was finally diagnosed with uterine cancer. As her symptoms escalated without relief, Drescher forged ahead on an odyssey for answers.

"It's part of my nature to want to be in control and take charge of the situation," she muses. "But we need to transform the idea from being a patient into being a *medical consumer*; we can be victimized by the medical community and big business when we're patients. I was lucky that uterine cancer is a slower-growing cancer, as opposed to ovarian cancer, which grows quickly and is often undetected until later, as most

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cancers mimic benign illnesses in their early stages. There are doctors who have diagnosed early-stage ovarian cancer as irritable bowel syndrome. Most doctors will not investigate thoroughly; there's this idea that if you hear galloping and you see a horse, you shouldn't look for a zebra. That's great and all, until you realize that there really was a zebra. If we could spot the zebras—if we could detect cancers early—95 percent of people would be cured. Stage I, that's the cure," Drescher firmly states.

Drescher believes that a lot of our attitudes about healthcare come down to how society has been conditioned; we simply haven't been programmed to be proactive about healthcare. Indeed, just the word *patient* implies patience and waiting. And if we're waiting for someone else to take charge of our health, we'd better be patient, because we'll be waiting a long time. "No one else can take charge of our health but our own selves," says Drescher. It's time to move away from this passive stance as a patient into a stance that's alert and ready to take action—the medical-consumer model.

After successfully advocating for herself, Drescher has taken her advocacy public with the advent of her nonprofit organization, Cancer Schmancer. Cancer Schmancer is dedicated to urging a shift toward whole-body wellness by raising awareness and educating consumers about prevention and early detection. "Cancer Schmancer has the cancer answer," says Drescher. "Early detection saves lives. It is the cure that we've all been waiting for." And you may not have to wait too long. If you live in Los Angeles or New York City, Cancer Schmancer has taken its crusade to the streets, with mobile screening units. In California, they have partnered with Inner Images, Inc. to have a "Fran Van" that services the entire state of California. In New York City, they've partnered with Project Renewal on the "Fran Scan Van."

As for the whole-body wellness initiative, Drescher believes that this is one of the most important aspects of healing. "Stress kills," she says. "It creates more disease than anything else. It's proven that unaddressed emotion will reveal itself physically, like with ulcers, for instance. That's what they really need to teach in schools and at home—how to express emotions, understand your body and have a whole experience. It's so important, but it's seldom recognized. We will see a shift," Drescher remarks optimistically.

Although the United States is considered to be a progressive nation, in many ways we are falling behind other countries when it comes to healthcare. This is evidenced by the fact that we do not have a healthcare system that focuses on illness prevention by emphasizing wellness and risk reduction; instead we have an illness man-

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agement system that caters to living with chronic disorders, many of which could be prevented with lifestyle changes. Drescher points out that the medical community has a very isolated way of viewing illness and doesn't pay enough attention to the big picture. She also notes that through her work for the State Department, she's observed that countries offering preventive measures have lower rates of disease and are better off economically as well, since prevention is always cheaper than intervention.

"The focus in our society isn't on curing you, but how to keep you alive with chronic illness," she says. "It's like closing the barn door after the horse is out. Cancer is not going to just go away; we have to identify the causes and eliminate them. Yet this is the road less traveled by big business and government, because no one wants to invest money into telling you that their products are unhealthy and cause cancer. Something has to happen. We have to stop being a sick nation and start becoming a well nation!"

"For the first time ever, children aren't expected to live as long as their parents. Babies are born pre-polluted, with 200 to 300 different chemicals found in their umbilical cords at birth. Mothers in the United States have flame retardant in their breast milk. Flame retardant!"

For Drescher, one of the primary methods of preventing cancer is daring to go where many companies and corporations won't: Getting the toxins out of our everyday products. "I always liked this quote from Einstein," she says, "where he talks about how we take one step forward and three steps back. We've been taught that

convenience is modern, contemporary, and this means good. Now we're seeing that it isn't all good. Antiperspirants, for example—not only are they packed with chemicals, but they stop us from sweating. Sweat is one of the primary ways we eliminate toxins. You wouldn't stop an animal from sweating; it's not natural. It's a life-saving function. Why are we doing it to ourselves?!"

Besides conditioning, Drescher acknowledges that being a woman in a man's world has contributed to healthcare hazards, particularly for women. Drescher reveals that in her work as a diplomat, she was shocked to find out a Pap smear was not part of the standard medical exam women in the military were required to have before deployment. "It's a male-dominated society; most men don't think about the need for Pap smears," Drescher says. The US military now has a reformed policy, and a Pap smear is a required part of the standard physical women receive. "We cannot ship our women off overseas, where they may not have access to a Pap smear for a year or two, then wonder why they have cervical cancer when they come home," says Drescher. "Now, if you have an abnormal Pap, it must be addressed, or you cannot deploy."

Drescher's advocacy work has propelled her to take another small step that has proven to be a giant leap for (wo)man kind. In 2007, she helped pass the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness Act, named Johanna's Law for Johanna Silver Gordon, who did not recognize the symptoms of her disease and passed away after a late-stage diagnosis of ovarian cancer. This landmark legislation authorizing the development of a national awareness campaign was not only the first of its kind in US history, but it also sidestepped party politics, passing unanimously. "Progress is slow, but it's happening," Drescher says. "We need more women on Capitol Hill."

When asked about her tips for staying healthy, Drescher laughs the laugh we all know so well. "Sometimes it's best to just use good old-fashioned common sense. Take rest periods; meditate. Eat more fruits and veggies. Eat organic. Drink more water. Exercise. Get good sleep. Use simple products. A lifestyle change can be intimidating, so do it gradually. Start by changing what you're putting in your mouth, then move to what you're cleaning with, then to what you're putting on your body, you know? Each time you go shopping, swap an item out. "And nothing is worth getting sick over. Laugh! It's the best medicine." 

For more information on Cancer Schmancer, please visit them online at cancerschmancer.org. You can also get more information on the early detection Fran Vans and Fran Scan Vans by calling (877) 426-3926 in California or (800) 564-6868 in New York City. Visit scanvan.org for the New York screening schedule.