



# New tough Political compassionate Woman

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**Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
is Florida's first Jewish congresswoman.  
The self-made politician has risen rapidly  
through the ranks of the Democratic Party  
while raising three young children  
and battling cancer.**

Scott S. Greenberger

**Ten weeks after taking office** as the first Jewish congresswoman from Florida, Debbie Wasserman Schultz was a virtual unknown on the national scene. It was early 2005, and the petite lawmaker, then 38, was attending a children's birthday party in her southern Florida district when an aide called to tell her she was needed in Washington: President George W. Bush and Republican leaders had called Congress into session to block the court-ordered removal of Terri Schiavo's feeding tube.

As a former state assemblywoman Wasserman Schultz was well-versed in the intricacies of the case that had become an emotional rallying point for the pro-life movement. Schiavo had been in a persistent vegetative state for 15 years. Her husband had been fighting a protracted legal battle in the Florida courts to have the tube removed, but her parents were fiercely opposed. Wasserman Schultz also understood the controversy on a personal level. A few months earlier, her husband's family had made the wrenching decision to remove his ailing aunt's feeding tube.

Although her colleagues warned her that the Schiavo case—with all its political ramifications—was too big an issue for a freshman congresswoman to take on,



**Wasserman Schultz actively campaigned for Barack Obama while secretly undergoing multiple surgeries for breast cancer. "I didn't want it to define me," she says.**

Wasserman Schultz forged ahead, drafting talking points for opponents of the GOP measure and challenging those she believed were misstating the facts surrounding Schiavo's prognosis. She helped lead the Democratic counter-attack, arguing that Congress was overstepping its authority.

The bill to prevent Schiavo's tube from being pulled passed in the House on March 21 at 12:41 a.m. and was signed into law 30 minutes later by President Bush, who had flown to Washington from his ranch at Crawford, Texas, just for this purpose. That morning, Wasserman Schultz squared off with House Majority Whip Roy Blunt on NBC's *Today Show*. With her tight blonde curls, bronzed complexion and velvety voice, she stood in stark contrast to the older, stouter Blunt. Host Ann Curry put Blunt on the defensive about a Republican memo circulating on Capitol Hill that called the case "a great political issue," suggesting that Republicans were merely using the tragedy to bolster their pro-life bona fides.

Wasserman Schultz listened patiently as Blunt pleaded ignorance about the embarrassing memo. When it came

her turn to speak, she directly criticized congressional intervention: "It literally rips the hinges off the door of every family home in America and allows Congress to insert itself into any family dispute that it doesn't agree with. It's just absolutely unconscionable," she said. "And the point is that I don't know Terri. I'm not a doctor. I'm not a bioethicist. I don't have any medical expertise, and neither does Congressman Blunt."

The federal courts eventually sided, as the lower courts had, with Schiavo's husband and the feeding tube was removed. Wasserman Schultz, who describes herself as an average "minivan mom," had made a name for herself in her first big national political battle. Dressed in a royal blue blouse, white pants and matching white pumps, Wasserman Schultz, now 42, recalls those days when I talk with her on Capitol Hill: "I knew it was a risk to get involved in that kind of high-profile way, and nobody asked me to." But, she notes, "I set out to educate my colleagues on the details and be the person who could debunk the garbage that was coming from the other side. They were just making stuff up, and I knew the facts."

Samuel Dubbin, a Miami lawyer active in Democratic politics and Jewish causes in Florida, describes the Schiavo affair as Wasserman Schultz's national coming-out party. "She did something that a lot of people in politics won't do—she stuck her neck out," he says. "She stood up and said 'this is wrong,' and helped rally the troops and public opinion and ended up having a real impact on a serious issue."

Wasserman Schultz's gamble paid off, and she quickly became a woman to watch in the Democratic Party. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi appointed her chief deputy whip in 2006. She holds seats on the powerful House Appropriations Committee, which controls government expenditures, and the Judiciary Committee. This year she was elected vice-chair of both the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. At this stage of their careers few House members hold such prestigious positions, are a constant presence on national television or snatch a coveted speaking slot at the Democratic National Convention. But no one would say Debbie Wasserman Schultz is typical.

The only mother in Congress with three young children (twins Rebecca and Jack are now nine and Shelby is five), she has endeared herself to the Democratic leadership by cheerfully doing the unglamorous jobs. For one, she promotes the party's message in late-night speeches delivered to an empty House chamber, but beamed to political junkies across the country by C-SPAN. She's also a capable fundraiser in a system where bringing in money is a prerequisite for climbing the political ladder. During the last election, her political action committee handed out nearly a half-million dollars to other Democratic candidates; only five Democratic lawmakers were more

generous. "It is a testament to her intelligence and diligence that she has risen so far so fast after just a few years in the House," Pelosi recently told *Time*.

Wasserman Schultz represents Florida's heavily Democratic 20th Congressional District, which includes much of southeastern Broward County and the northern Biscayne Bay shoreline of Miami-Dade County. Like most of her constituents, Wasserman Schultz is pro-choice, pro-gun control and pro-gay rights. Last year, she voted with Planned Parenthood 100 percent of the time, and the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers' union, gave her an "A." In contrast, she earned an "F" from the National Rifle Association, and her ratings from anti-tax groups were abysmal.

She has gained a reputation for not pulling punches. During last year's presidential campaign she called then presidential candidate John McCain a hypocrite and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin a liar. She read the dictionary definition of "fraud" to then Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez when she questioned him about the controversial firing of U.S. Attorneys by the Bush administration. And when oil company executives tried to explain rising gas prices last June, she challenged them. "I can't say that there's evidence that you are manipulating the price, but I believe you probably are," she said as she leaned forward on the dais, her hand pressed to her cheek. "So prove to me that you're not." In February, she brushed back California Republican Brian Bilbray's opposition to President Barack Obama's economic stimulus package on MSNBC's *Hardball*. "What Brian did by voting 'no' today is he voted against creating 385,000 jobs in his own state, 8,000 jobs in his own district," she said.

Many liberals love her hard-charging style, and after each of her television appearances the video is quickly posted online with a slew of "you go, girl!" comments. Conservatives, in contrast, are

learning to loathe her. Mark Finkelstein, a conservative blogger, argued that it was a "breach of congressional comity" to ambush Bilbray with district-specific job numbers. "It is called *Hardball*, but never before have I seen a member of Congress pull this kind of stunt. You just don't show a colleague up like this on national TV," Finkelstein wrote. Conservative syndicated columnist Mark Steyn blasted Wasserman Schultz's interrogation of the oil executives. "Had I been in the hapless oil man's expensive shoes, I'd have answered, 'Hey, you first. I can't say that there is evidence that you're sleeping with barnyard animals, but I believe that you probably are. So prove to me that you are not.' Whatever happened to the presumption of innocence and prima facie evidence, lady?" Steyn wrote.

But the Republicans who have known Wasserman Schultz the longest tend to view her as a worthy, if strident, opponent. "She's fiercely partisan on certain issues," said Ed Pozzuoli, the former chair of the Broward County Republican Party, who has squared off against Wasserman Schultz in public debates. "But I wouldn't be fair to her, or objective, if I said that she doesn't also bring a tremendous amount of political skill and compassion to the job."

**Debbie Wasserman grew up** on Long Island. Her father, Larry, was chief financial officer of Roanna Togs, Inc., a children's clothing manufacturer in Manhattan, and her mother, Ann, managed a plant nursery. The Wassermans were not religiously observant, but the future congresswoman took away from dinner-table conversations the message that fortunate families like her own had a responsibility to give something back.

At first, her idea of "repairing the world" tended toward the animal kingdom—she wanted to be a veterinarian. As a teenager she worked after school in an

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—Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House

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animal hospital, and she enrolled in farm animal health courses at an agricultural college. Her first foray into politics was not a smashing success: She ran twice for student council and lost both times.

Even so, there were signs of what she would become. Her brother Steven, 39, a lawyer in the U.S. Attorney's office in Washington, DC, has trouble recalling all the activities that his sister enthusiastically plunged into, from the school band and the French Club to softball and the Honor Society. "Debbie has always been an extrovert, always out there meeting people and speaking to people, so it doesn't surprise me that she's doing what she's doing and doing it so well," he says. Her father still marvels at the career path his daughter took: "Where did she come from? Both my wife and I, as children and young adults, were not out front like she is. We were more in the background."

When she arrived at the University of Florida planning to pursue her veterinary dream, her struggles in a required chemistry course prompted her to reconsider. That's when a boyfriend reignited her interest in student government. "It was like I got hit with a lightning bolt," she says. She switched her major to political science, became a campus political leader and decided to pursue a career in government. She stayed on to earn a master's degree in political science. Determined to work for a state legislator, she sent her resume to 180 lawmakers—90 in Tallahassee and 90 in Albany—but got just three interviews.



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Former State Representative Peter Deutsch of Fort Lauderdale recalls that Wasserman Schultz’s resume hinted at a “level of intensity” that was unusual. “At the time, I didn’t have any positions,” he says, but he was impressed and offered her a job on his campaign. When one of his legislative aides resigned several weeks later, he hired her as a member of his policy staff. In 1992, Deutsch left his state seat to make a successful run for Congress, and he asked his 25-year old aide to consider running to replace him.

Five other Democrats also wanted Deutsch’s seat, and party leaders urged the young woman to wait her turn. Instead, she embarked on a shoe-leather campaign that Tallahassee politicians still marvel at. For six months, beginning in the late afternoon every day, she marched through the streets of the district, knocking on doors. She walked in the torrid summer sun and in torrential downpours, wearing a yellow slicker she borrowed from her husband Steve Schultz. She walked so far, so often, that she lost 18 pounds from her already slim frame, and her weight plummeted into double digits. Steve, alarmed, began sending his wife out of the house with chocolate milkshakes. By the end of the campaign, she had visited an estimated 25,000 homes. The walking paid off: In September Wasserman Schultz won the Democratic primary by an astounding 31 points, and she cruised to victory in November. At 26, she was the youngest

woman ever elected to the Florida state legislature.

When Wasserman Schultz got to Tallahassee, the good old boys in the Florida House of Representatives still thought of her as Deutsch’s aide. It took time for her to earn their respect. “Being young was more difficult than being a woman,” she recalls. “Most of the members were old enough to be my parents or grandparents.”

It didn’t help that she began her legislative career by proposing measures that played well in her liberal district, but were easily caricatured by conservative colleagues. She pushed for a law that would have forced dry cleaners to charge the same rates for cleaning women’s clothes as men’s and authored another bill requiring that each state board be comprised of equal numbers of men and women. When she proposed a measure mandating gender-neutral language in all state statutes, her colleagues gave her a nickname that even she had to admit was funny: “Wasserperson.” Her strong support for the gay community and for abortion rights helped to cement her reputation as one of the most liberal members of the legislature. But she reached across the aisle to win passage of a swimming pool safety bill and appealed to a broader constituency with her dogged fight for smaller class sizes. In 1996, she and other south Florida Jewish leaders successfully lobbied Governor Lawton Chiles to veto an education bill that would have allowed voluntary student-led prayer at graduations, assemblies and sporting events.

When she was elected to the state Senate in 2000, some political observers wondered whether such a fiery liberal could thrive in the more moderate, collegial upper chamber, so different from the rough-and-tumble House. But she tempered her tenacity with personal charm. In 2004, Republican Senate President Jim King told the *Miami*

*Herald* that Wasserman Schultz “can do the feminine ax murderer—the grab you, shake you, I’m going to be your worst nightmare—or also be very demure, very flirtatious, playing on her feminine wiles.” At the same time, she raised her state profile by leading opposition to GOP Governor Jeb Bush’s efforts to promote school vouchers and enact deep tax cuts. When Wasserman Schultz met George W. Bush for the first time, he joked, “I know who you are. You’re the one who gave my little brother a hard time down in Florida.” “Maybe just a little bit, Mr. President,” she answered.

Jeb Bush may have warned his older brother about the new congresswoman from Florida, but the Florida governor’s former spokesman, Justin Sayfie, says his boss never harbored any personal animus toward Wasserman Schultz. “I don’t think she was a thorn in his side. She played the role of the loyal opposition in the Florida legislature very well.” Sayfie, now the editor of a newsletter on Florida politics, describes Wasserman Schultz as “smart, tenacious and politically savvy.”

When Peter Deutsch left his U.S. House seat and made an unsuccessful run for the Senate in 2004, he once again cleared the way for his former aide to move up the political ladder. This time, Wasserman Schultz was viewed as such a formidable candidate that no Democrat opposed her, and she easily defeated Republican Margaret Hostetter in the general election, winning the House seat with 70 percent of the vote.

During the 2004 campaign Hostetter, a divorced mother of grown children, had argued that Wasserman Schultz’s young family would distract her from her duties in Washington. During one candidates’ forum, Wasserman Schultz pulled a peach crayon from her purse to take notes—evidence, Hostetter said, of a “frazzled life.” But Hostetter didn’t gain much traction with that



**Wasserman Schultz drops off her daughter Shelby at school.**

charge, and Wasserman Schultz fiercely dismisses the idea that a woman can't be both an attentive mother and effective lawmaker. Even in the heat of last year's campaign, when she condemned Sarah Palin's politics, she bristled at the suggestion that the Republican vice presidential nominee was shirking her family responsibilities by running. There is a "double standard for moms who are trying to do any professional job and balance family. It's very difficult for any of us," she says.

Losses by Palin and Hillary Clinton made 2008 a bittersweet year for women in American politics. Today, there are only 92 women in Congress, a mere 17 percent of its 535 members. "One of the reasons I ran was because I felt like I represented a significantly underrepresented group. There aren't a lot of young women, and there certainly aren't a lot of young moms," she says. Wasserman Schultz wants Congress to promote paid family leave and more flexible work schedules.

Managing her schedule has been a challenge. As soon as the House adjourns for the week, typically on Thursday, Wasserman Schultz flies home to Florida, where she focuses on taking care of her "children's needs and being there for them." Wasserman Schultz is a trailblazer, argues Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "Women politicians are less likely than their male colleagues to have children under 18 living at home," she says. "They put off the running until those family commitments are over, so their trajectories in politics tend to be shorter. What makes her unusual is that...she has run for office with young children and been successful. She has become a symbol of that next generation of political women."

This March, Wasserman Schultz disclosed that she had successfully battled breast cancer. She has had seven major surgeries since December 2007, including a double mastectomy

after testing positive for the BRCA2 mutation. The mutation, which increases the chances of the cancer spreading, is more prevalent among Ashkenazi Jewish women. She showed her characteristic toughness during the year of treatment, which ended last December, not missing a single day of work and campaigning relentlessly, first for Clinton and then for Barack Obama. Only her family, her closest friends and a few aides knew she was ill. "I didn't want it to define me," she says. "I wanted to be Debbie Wasserman Schultz the congresswoman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz the mom, not Debbie Wasserman Schultz who is battling breast cancer."

On March 23, just two days after going public, Wasserman Schultz introduced legislation that would direct the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to begin breast cancer education campaigns in high schools and universities. The congresswoman and many breast cancer advocates say

that because the accepted recommended age for beginning mammograms is 40, younger women wrongly assume they can't develop breast cancer. Her bill calls for a \$9 million educational campaign that pays particular attention to minorities such as African-Americans and Ashkenazi Jews.

In a strange way, cancer brought Wasserman Schultz closer to her heritage. Until she was tested, she had no idea that Ashkenazi Jews are more likely to carry the BRCA2 mutation and the discovery, she says, "physically and emotionally connected me to my Judaism."

"I represent a district with a very large Jewish population," Wasserman Schultz says; Broward County alone has more than 260,000 Jews in a total population of about 1.8 million. However, as late as the 1950s, Jews couldn't buy real estate in Broward, and hotels wouldn't accept them as guests. In 1950, barely one percent of the 183,000 people in the county were Jewish. In the decades since, as Cubans, who vote overwhelmingly Republican, moved into Miami, Jews migrated north into Broward. These include many of the Jewish retirees who live in huge high-rises in Hollywood and Hallandale and who, Wasserman

Schultz says, think of her as a daughter. "It was like they sort of wished for me what they wished for their own children, and kind of propelled me into office with their sentiment." Wasserman Schultz's young Jewish family is one of many further inland, in affluent suburban towns like Weston (where she lives), Davie, Plantation and Sunrise.

"I have a very strong Jewish identity, and I'm very proud of my heritage," she says. The family belongs to a conservative synagogue, B'nai Aviv in Weston, and she is giving her children a more religious upbringing than she had. They attend Hebrew school and, unlike her, they will have bar and bat mitzvahs. "Assimilation has become such a problem for us in the Jewish community," she says. "I really believe that it's important for Jewish continuity for the next generation to understand our values, our heritage, our culture, our history. I expose my own children to as much about our religion as I can."

Two of her legislative achievements have been of particular interest to her Jewish constituents. During her first term in Washington, Wasserman Schultz worked with Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, a Jewish Republican, to promote the creation of an annual Jewish American Heritage Month to educate the wider public about Jewish contributions to American history. In April 2006, President Bush signed a proclamation designating May of every year for the celebration. After being denied insurance because she intended to visit Israel, Wasserman Schultz introduced a bill, which passed in the House but not the Senate, barring life insurance companies from discriminating against those who want to travel to "dangerous" countries such as Kenya and Israel.

Wasserman Schultz describes her inaugural trip to Israel, in 1995, as "one of the most incredible experiences of my life." She has visited several times since.

THE CREAK OF THE DOORS LEADING IN TO THE TEMPLE  
A free translation of a Talmudic passage in B. Yoma 39b

The creak of the doors leading in to the Temple  
—The intimate chamber, the Holy of Holies—  
Resounds for a distance—for eight times the distance—  
That one is permitted to walk on Shabbat.

The scent of the frankincense burned on the altar  
—The cinnamon, saffron; the cassia, myrrh—  
Is smelled for a distance—a ten pasha distance—  
Jerusalem-Jericho, traveled by foot.

The goatherds of Jericho's gated-in grazing ones  
—Speckled and spotted, give glory to God!—  
Sneeze tickled in nostril—a goat-a-choo nostril—  
When breathing in frankincense wafted on high.

The brides of Jerusalem's sages and scholars  
—The henna-haired gazed-ats, gazelle-like in womb—  
Purveyed not a perfume—forewent every fragrance—  
The cinnamon, saffron; the cassia, myrrh.

My father raised goats in the high hills of Michmar  
—Raised he-goats and she-goats and get-at-your-goats—  
Who sneezed in a tempest—a lift-your-lamp tempest—  
Who shuddered in pleasure from frankincense, myrrh.

An old man once told me: I went once to Shiloh  
—The city of ruins, the mishkan dismantled—  
I rested my face (My) between her two walls (God!)  
The cinnamon, saffron! The cassia, myrrh!

—Ilana Kurshan

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“I’m incredibly hopeful about the possibility of electing a woman—or a Jewish—president.”

—Debbie Wasserman Schultz

“I always knew that Israel’s existence was important,” she says. “But I left Israel after my first trip with a real commitment to helping ensure that Israel’s existence is never questioned or challenged.” She is hopeful that under President Obama, the U.S. will once again be a “catalyst” for peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Some political observers speculate that a Senate run is in the cards for Wasserman Schultz. Historically, however, it has been difficult for politicians from south Florida, especially liberal Jewish ones, to make it to the Senate. The state’s only Jewish senator, Richard Stone, elected in 1974, served a single term.

The smoothest path for Wasserman Schultz may be to stay in the House. Her seat is safe. She ran unopposed in 2006, and in 2008 she again defeated Margaret Hostetter, this time with 78 percent of the vote. One possibility is that she could eventually follow in Nancy Pelosi’s steps and become Speaker. “I know she’s very ambitious and given her personality and history, I’m sure she would want to go higher,” Larry Wasserman says of his daughter’s political future.

While remaining coy about her ambitions, Wasserman Schultz believes that the election of the nation’s first African-American president proves that bias is no longer a barrier. “The American voter has now evolved to a point where they don’t choose their candidate based on color, creed or gender. They choose based on quality and what they’d like to see happen,” she says. “I’m incredibly hopeful about the possibility of electing a woman—or a Jewish—president.” ☪

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