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CANADA'S HEROES OF 2005

(Research & Education: Esther Matsubuchi)

“Paddling for Life” by Alisa Smith

Across the gunnels of the dragon boat, she put down the wooden paddle that had her name burned into it: Esther Matsubuchi. It was etched by the husband of another breast-cancer sufferer; but unlike Matsubuchi, his wife hadn't pulled through. However, the hundreds of women in brightly painted dragon boats bobbing on the gleaming waters of False Creek in Vancouver on June 26, 2005, had made it. Each held the stem of a carnation to be tossed in unison into the sea, making the waters pink with hope and remembrance.

At that moment Matsubuchi wasn't a 68-year-old housewife with four loving children and four rambunctious grandchildren. She was a pioneer – one of 24 women who, ten years ago, agreed to be guinea pigs in a risky experiment: Could women who'd had breast cancer do upper body exercise ?

The conventional wisdom was no. Doctors counselled these women not to garden, play the piano, knit or vacuum. The consequences were dire, they said. One in four breast-cancer survivors would develop lymphedema, which causes a debilitating and permanent swelling of the arms. No one really knew why.

But because Matsubuchi conquered her early fear of lymphedema, she and her crew were now competing with 62 teams from around the world at the tenth-anniversary Abreast In A Boat race. There are now more than 150 breast-cancer teams, each with 20 women who paddle like crazy in unison for the three minutes it takes to skim 500 metres across the water.

“The number of breast-cancer crews grows by the day,” says Mike Haslam, executive president of the International Dragon Boat Federation. And their increasing presence at international regattas gets people talking about the disease, which in many countries has previously been considered too embarrassing to mention. In their bright-pink T-shirts—and often wacky accessories, from pink feather boas to wigs—they grab attention wherever they go.

“Esther is one of the very few who have paddled every year,” says Dr. Don McKenzie, the University of British Columbia sports-medicine expert who first approached the local breast-cancer support groups with his revolutionary idea. She has paddled all over the West Coast, as well as in Poland and New Zealand.

Back in 1996 there was very little research on lymphedema, but the attention received by the Abreast In A Boat movement has changed that. There are now at least four major lymphedema research centers around North America specializing in the relationship of breast cancer and exercise. And thanks to the numerous papers McKenzie has published on the benefits of upper-body exercise for breast-cancer survivors, physicians are changing the advice they give their patients.

“To see a woman of Esther’s age running around with such pep is incredible,” says Beth Greer, a 45-year-old Vancouver schoolteacher and cancer survivor. “For mental recovery from cancer, the important thing is to connect with such women. No amount of doctor’s words can do as much.”

In her North Vancouver home, fronted by a Japanese garden, Matsubuchi gives the impression of glowing good health in her pink Abreast in a Boat vest. Her face is hardly lined and she looks much younger than her 68 years. “I feel 25,” she says.

Matsubuchi has always borne hardship calmly. As a child during World War II, she was part of the mass evacuation of Japanese-Canadians from the British Columbia coast because of hysteria about “enemy aliens”. Her family spent the next few years in an internment camp in Slocan, in B. C.’s interior. “It was just part of life”, she shrugs, and makes no complaint.

Just as it is hard to get Matsubuchi to expand on her accomplishments, she won’t expand on her difficulties. It is daughter Wendy who breaks into tears when recalling the months of chemotherapy and radiation treatments her mother endured in 1989 and 1990. However, Matsubuchi pulled through, and after about three years, the pain from her lumpectomy went away.

In the meantime she found out she had diabetes, for which exercise is strongly recommended. She tried skating, but because she was careful not to do exercises involving her arms, she still felt weak. She had been cancer-free for six years when, in 1996, she took McKenzie up on his challenge. He showed the 24 prospective women a video of dragon boating so they would understand how it worked. They were awed by how fast the boaters’ paddles moved. Then McKenzie rewound the video and played it again—it had been in slow motion.

For Matsubuchi, tired of not being able to tinker on the piano, garden or knit—her favourite activities—dragon boating turned out to be the best thing she could have done. “It was after dragon boating that I felt recovered,” she says. She keeps at it year after year because she wants to pass this feeling on to all breast-cancer survivors.

“She’s been one of those kind of people all her life,” says Wendy. “What I call a quiet hero.”