

# Paddling Away From Breast Cancer

By Marlis Silver-Sweeney

LAST JUNE AT THE ALCAN DRAGON BOAT Festival in Vancouver, dozens of teams and bystanders lined up to watch one inspiring race. It wasn't the finals, or the infamous "Guts and Glory" a-k dredge. Only one man was in this race, amongst the hundreds of women. And even though the participants had been training for months - years in some cases- no one particularly cared who won.

As the hundreds of survivors got off their boats from the Breast Cancer Survivors Race, they were followed by Don McKenzie MPE'72, MO'77, founder of the dragon boat breast cancer survivor movement and the only man allowed on board. A myriad of pink stormed out onto the dock and through the kilometer long arch way formed by the paddles of other team members. The carnations they had dropped into the water to commemorate the women who haven't survived the disease floated in the distance, but the visceral cheers, laughter and tears of the women on the dock made it clear that they were winning their race against breast cancer.

Margaret Hobson BEO'64, MEO'79, is a retired teacher and current president of the Abreast in a Boat Society.

Margaret joined Abreast in a Boat in 1999 after undergoing breast cancer treatment the previous year. "I could hardly wait to finish surgery and treatment so I could join the team" she says, matter-of-fact, as if it's like waiting for a broken bone to heal. Paddling a dragon boat on False Creek however, isn't a walk on the seawall."

I thought I was going to die the first couple of practices. I was very fresh out of treatment and I had started going to the gym but it was not enough.

"Eventually though, the sore muscles and the strenuous exercise worked itself into a routine, and Margaret got more from her dragon boat team than the need for a hot bath twice week." I never joined any support groups but I think Abreast in a Boat gives you one. If a person has a problem related to a medical condition there is



Abreast in a Boat team, 2007.

someone on the boat who knows something about it."

That someone is generally Dr. Don McKenzie. Dr. Don (as he's called) started the first dragon boat team for breast cancer survivors in 1996. Abreast in a Boat was part of his plan to combat the idea that upper body exercise in breast cancer survivors would increase their chances of developing lymphedema. Besides lab and hospital-based studies, Dr. Don wanted to develop a "visible demonstration that women treated for breast cancer could do strenuous, physical upper body exercise and not develop lymphedema."

The first team, made up of 24 breast cancer survivors, started his study. The women trained for two months in a gym before getting in the boat, and they were measured and tested. Starting slowly, they gradually built their strength and competed at the Alcan Dragon Boat Festival. Dr. Don's hypothesis was correct. "People got stronger, people got fitter, and they showed that they didn't develop lymphedema.

"But what happened afterwards was a huge surprise." It got totally out of control," he laughs. What started as a study of 24 women turned into a movement of thousands of women worldwide including teams in New York, Tasmania, Singapore, Poland, Dubai, Cape Town and now six teams in the Lower Mainland alone, with Dr. Don coaching a new novice team every year. "It went way beyond the physical things we were doing. When you push off from the dock at False Creek we're all in the same boat. This isn't about cancer anymore. It's about exercise and health and the rest of your life. When we push off we're paddling away from breast cancer."

And then there's the sisterhood.

"We own a lot of pink clothing," Marg says, and I remember the Ten Years Abreast Festival in Vancouver two years ago. Pink boas, wigs, shirts, shoes, dogs and husbands were littered across the park, proudly removing any possible stigma from the disease.

"There is a real bond among breast cancer survivors." Once, Margaret tells me, she met a woman at a party and they started talking about Abreast in a Boat. When Margaret came home that night, there was an e-mail from that woman telling her that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and hadn't told anyone. She wanted to join the team.

"Just the fact that we're out there, we're paddling, we're vibrant and enjoying life, I think it's contagious. We certainly spread the word that there's life after breast cancer." And spread the word they have. These faces of the disease are consulted on any big decisions by the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, they're helping women around the world come to terms with a serious illness and they're tough competitors. From a medical study to a world-wide movement, these women are Busting Out (a team in Ottawa), Bosom Buddies (a team in Nova Scotia), and are Paddling for Life (a team in Powell River). They're simply inspirational. ♦

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