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Breast cancer survivor is the very definition of 'hero'

Most medical experts now agree that moderate exercise is good for breast cancer survivors, and might even help to prevent conditions historically common among those who have suffered from breast cancer.

But such was not always the case. Until recently, doctors cautioned those with breast cancer to avoid vigorous, repetitive exercise, for fear that it could cause lymphedema, a permanent swelling of the arms.

The change in medical opinion came thanks to new research, and while researchers are usually credited with scientific breakthroughs, no medical advances would ever be made without the willing participation of research subjects.

In 1996, 24 women agreed to become the subjects of a study that examined the effects of exercise on breast cancer survivors—certainly not a trivial decision given the prevailing wisdom that said exercise could create further problems, which is the last thing those who have survived a potentially fatal disease want to hear.

Nevertheless, the 24 women tempted fate for the sake of medical knowledge, and their selfless acts have contributed to better lives for other breast cancer survivors.

One of those intrepid women was Esther Matsubuchi. The 69-year-old woman has now been honoured by Reader's Digest magazine as one of its 2005 Canadian Heroes of the Year.

Matsubuchi was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1989, and agreed to take part in the 1996 study since she had already lived longer than expected. She therefore began participating in the Alcan Dragon Boat Festival, as part of a group now known as Abreast In A Boat.

While the first boat race was a tough slog, Matsubuchi persevered, just as she has throughout her life: The mother and grandmother was also a subject of a much less admirable experiment -- the internment of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War.

Despite her many trials, Matsubuchi has not only survived but flourished, and has helped to ensure that other people will have the opportunity to flourish. And in risking her own welfare to improve the welfare of others, she is the very definition of a hero.