

Dragon Boat Festival in Sarasota celebrates cancer survivors



Sistership Calgary, a dragon boat racing team of breast cancer survivors from Alberta, Canada, races in Kalispell, Montana this past September. (Courtesy photo)

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SARASOTA

When her professor learned that Marisol Rodriguez was taking classes while undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer, she was appalled.

“You should be at home,” the professor said, and something inside Rodriguez crumbled.

Moments like this seemed to accompany a cancer diagnosis, for Rodriguez, now 51, and others who have sometimes found that those around them expect their lives to be less with cancer in them.

It happened to Rodriguez, of Portland, Oregon, as she balanced teaching, parenting and pursuing a doctorate degree after being diagnosed with breast cancer.

It happened to 2014 Dragon Boat Festival co-host Kim Bonomo, who was angry with her body after her own diagnosis, and was looking for ways to get her own power back.

“I thought, 'Why would my body do this to me?'" the Miami resident said.

And it happened to Cheryl Lamers, of Canada, who turned to dragon boat racing partly because it allowed the women around her to thrive in an environment where coaches treated them like any other athlete.

“It goes back to feeling positive and taking back control in your life that cancer has eroded in some ways,” said Lamers, 59.

This week, 2,500 women from 10 countries will travel to Sarasota for a sport they have transformed into a beacon of strength and community in the wake of a breast cancer diagnosis. They have names like Rowbust (London, Ontario, Canada), Kentucky Thorough-Breasts (Highland Heights, Kentucky) and Dam Busters (Melbourne, Australia.)

These women, and a handful of men, reject the notion that their lives are over after a cancer diagnosis, although most also say they never expected to be here.

Rodriguez remembers seeing the dragon boats on the river the first time she came to Portland. She thought they were beautiful. She never thought she would be on one.

Then came the “ugly” dream in 2005. In the dream, she was bald, with hair coming out of her ears. She had already seen a purple mark on her breast, but shrugged it off. Her priorities were her family, her job as a Spanish literature professor and high school teacher — she did not have time for doctors.

But Rodriguez, originally from Peru, found the experience foreboding. The dream made her seek help.

A month later, diagnosed with stage II breast cancer, Rodriguez fought to maintain normalcy among teaching and treatment.

She taught. She did chemo. She rested.

She worried about who would take care of her children if she died, but she never spoke about it.

“I didn't know how to talk to my children, or what to talk to them about,” Rodriguez said. “You don't have any guidelines about what to do.”

So she held together a facade for three years, she says, a Latina mom with cancer, trying to keep the bad inside, and only sharing the “good stuff.”

Until her body was tentatively clear of cancer, and her doctor suggested she join a dragon boat team for cancer survivors. She joined the Pink Phoenix team in Portland.

“It was a fantastic group who were strong, smart, nice and very involved in cancer awareness in the community,” Rodriguez says.

Lamers found that same sense of camaraderie in Sistership Calgary, a team that formed after breast cancer's association with the sport, when a Canadian doctor ran a program for breast cancer patients to dispute the idea that upper-body exercise put patients at a greater risk of lymphedema in 1996.

“It's about living well,” Lamers said. “That's what our team likes to focus on. We're not a support group but we are supportive of one another.”

The thing is, she says, look at the people in her boat. They aren't just surviving, they are thriving. Some have Stage IV cancer, and are competing in between treatments.

Sometimes it's enough just to know that the person beside you gets it. Lamer was diagnosed in 1996. And then in 2000. And then in 2001. She has had two separate cancers, and one recurrence. She's cancer-free for now, even though she can't know if she'll always be cancer-free.

She knew nobody on the team when she joined five years ago. Now, she had a sisterhood to support her.

Rodriguez found that, too. And something funny happened. In the beginning, her body was weak, and paddling was hard. She could barely lift her arms.

But at some point, as she got stronger and stronger, dragon boat racing gave her an opportunity to remember who she was, to do something just for her, to come out of the shell she built around herself for years.

This year, a friend nominated Rodriguez as a Model of Courage, part of the Warriors in Pink breast cancer awareness program through Ford Motor Company. Her daughter, Ariel Carter-Rodriguez was nominated too.

As mother and daughter worked through the program to generate conversations about breast cancer, particularly between mothers and daughters, the pair finally spoke about Rodriguez's cancer

experiences, and Ariel's experiences living it. Seven years later — everything. The pain, the worry, prevention, a plan if things got better or worse.

Cancer is a bully, but Rodriguez had something to celebrate.

“We're alive. We're not broken toys,” Rodriguez says. “We're stronger than our parts.”

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Sarasota Crew men's four boat took No. 1 at the Head of the Charles regatta in Boston this weekend. Read more on Katy Bergen's competition and training blog, “Finish Lines,” at <http://health.heraldtribune.com/>.