

Dragonboat Teams for Breast Cancer funded as community projects

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Crowds of people sit in the hot sun along the North Saskatchewan, listening to the high-energy strains of classic pop tunes, watching the river — anticipating the race about to get underway. Below them, on the pathway, a colourful stream of paddlers make their way to the boat launch, wearing vibrant, matching team t-shirts — filled with excitement. But none of them can match the energy and passion of four special teams. They've already won their most important battles, and as they march, their chants convey the determination and spirit that it took to get them here ... *"We are ladies dressed in pink; We are tougher than you think; Dip that paddle, make that thrust; Survivors every one of us ..."*

On the weekend of Aug. 18, 19 and 20, the 4th Annual Edmonton Dragon Boat Festival descended upon the North Saskatchewan River and Louise McKinney Park. Over 38 teams participated in the event and — while most of them were young, hard-bodied corporate competitors — four boats of mature women stood out. They were the women of Breast Friends (Edmonton), Sistership I and II (Calgary) and Bosom Buddies (Nova Scotia). All survivors of breast cancer, each member had her own reasons for participating.

Elaine Andrew, the drummer for Sister Ship I said, "I've had two surgeries; two rounds with breast cancer." You'd never know it. Tanned and strong, she points out the four ribbons printed on the sleeve of her hot pink t-shirt — one for each team member that has passed away. Elaine became involved in 1998. Upon hearing that team members were being sought in Calgary for Sistership, she thought she'd give it a go. She had been physically active before her diagnosis, and wanted to regain the strength and stamina she felt she had lost.

She was also familiar with Abreast in a Boat, the first Canadian survivor team, originating in Vancouver. Dr. Don MacKenzie, a UBC Sports Medicine practitioner and the person responsible for the formation of that team, was convinced that "women don't

need to sit around after breast cancer surgery — go ahead and use your upper bodies — you're not going to increase your risk of lymphodema (swelling of the arms)." His point of view was not widely held by the medical establishment at the time, but he has since been proven correct.

At the first Calgary Dragon Boat Festival in 1998, Elaine's first event, Sistership won its race — and the Sportsmanship Trophy. It took them all entirely by surprise. Elaine feels that it was the team's attitude that garnered that honor. The only experienced racer on the team was the drummer, Kelly Bryant, who passed away six weeks after the race.

When asked what the best thing about being on the team was, Elaine said, "The camaraderie is fabulous. It's not a sit around and worry thing. It's the fresh air, the sun dancing on the water, getting those 'vital juices' flowing. It's taking all my anger and moving it into something physical ... and dispersing it."

Andrew recalled a speech delivered to the conference delegates in Vancouver last year by Milt Wong of the Hong Kong Bank, now Chancellor of Simon Fraser University. Mr. Wong was given a mandate by the Hong Kong Bank to work for a charity of his choice; he chose to support breast cancer. In an address to the delegates he said, "The competition in the Breast Cancer Challenge is not between the teams occupying these 10 lanes. They are all competing against Lane 11 — breast cancer."