



Gone, but not forgotten

Life Starts Now!

By Gaydon Willis

When you belong to an organization like Sister-ship you expect it to happen. That's not to say that you like it, but you expect it. It's just that you don't expect it to happen to vital, physically fit people. When it does it hits you like a ton of bricks.

We lost a teammate a few weeks ago. There's not much else we can say about that. The void is there. An empty bench seat will be filled by another member, but we will never forget.

In order to join Sistership you must be a breast cancer survivor. Yes, we have all paid the price. We have all had some form of surgery and have had some kind of treatment. We've all gone through the rough part and now we are getting our lives back.

We join Sistership to celebrate life and to dig deep within ourselves to see what we are made of. We push ourselves to develop a level of physical fitness that most of us have never experienced before in our lives. But then, you see, we have never had breast cancer before either. We want our families, our friends and the world to know that we aren't dead yet! We are alive and we celebrate every day we wake up.

There are no more bad days. No matter what is happening, and we all know life goes on, there are no more bad days.

We spend four months in dryland training before we hit the water. During this time we are challenged to get in shape, to make a commitment and above all to not let the team down.

It's no longer about "me". It's about "us". What can I do to make my team better? How can I contribute to the wellness of the team?

We are expected to show up at the gym a minimum of twice a week, along with incorporating regular exercise into our schedule. No matter how you feel, or what the weather is doing, you have a responsibility to show up for team workouts.

When you consider what we have already been through, this is nothing. This is not for sissies!

Once we hit the water sometime in May, we practice two times a week in addition to other regular exercise programs. By the time the festival season hits in July, we are ready to go. We are healthy. We are strong. We are fit and we want to win!

A mysterious thing starts to happen during this time. It is something that you can't really put your finger on but it becomes more obvious at every gathering — we begin to bond.

We become a team. We all have one goal in mind. We celebrate each others' good news and successes. We also support each other in times of distress and setbacks. We are there for each other. We have become a team in so many ways.

No one else can understand us like our team members, not even our closest loved ones. Why? Because our teammates have all been there. We understand. We don't judge and we listen. We listen to the spoken fears and sense the unspoken ones. We talk. We support. We cry. And then we laugh, pour a glass of red wine and party because we're not dead yet! And everyday is a gift.

No, we don't expect it to happen to vital, healthy people. But when it does, we carry on. We paddle in memory of all those who have gone before us. We paddle to win and we never forget.

We are the Sistership Dragon Boat racing team. We are 22 hearts, one goal. Just watch us win!

Gaydon Willis is a Cochrane mother of six, a registered massage therapist and a breast cancer survivor willing to share her story. Gaydonwillis@shaw.ca.