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stark courage

In every issue we feature an article on a company informally referred to as an Adventurer, where we chronicle the efforts of entrepreneurs or small business owners in their endeavour to create and build profitable enterprises out of new ideas and sheer determination. This month we follow the unique fund-raising efforts of a Calgary team of dragon boat racers, made up entirely of women who have lived with and, in some cases, are still living with breast cancer. Because we are a business publication, it's not our usual practice to cover the fund-raising efforts of not-for-profit groups, but it is our belief that the spirit of adventure exemplified by these courageous women is not only inspiring, but entrepreneurial, in the best sense.

THE idea of a group of women doffing their clothes for a calendar hardly seems like a novel concept. But when those women are aged 40 to 60-plus years (the oldest refuses to reveal her age), are members of a Calgary dragon boat racing team and are all breast cancer survivors, they're bound to attract some attention.

"Shock value is often good just for awareness," says Kim Blaikie, vice-president of Sistership, the group behind the calendar. "We're trying to extend the message that we're still vital and happy and sexy in our own ways despite the problems that we've had."

Blaikie was one of 20 women posing semi-nude for the 2001 calendar. "I'm Miss October," she says with a laugh. In her photograph, she is shown posing with a Japanese pagoda that belonged to her younger sister, one of the original members of the Sistership Dragon Boat Team when it started up in January 1998. "Kelly was the only one with any dragon boating experience. So she was our drummer and kind of our ringleader," explains Blaikie. Their first year was "like a storybook"—they captured the Alberta Women's Championship and the Sportsmanship Cup. "I knew my sister was just hanging on for the races and she did really, really well," says

Blaikie. "Six weeks later she died."

Since then, Sistership has added two more boats to the team, raising its numbers from 24 to 75. The women's big goal, and their major reason for doing the calendar, is to send as many women as possible to Toronto, where they are hoping to compete at Canada's largest dragon boat race in a heat dedicated to breast cancer survivors.

The idea for the calendar came about at a regular team meeting. Sistership member Kathy Ingraham had brought the Ladies of Rylstone calendar, done by a group of middle-aged British women who bared all to raise money for leukemia research. The women became a British media sensation and raised more than \$500,000 for their cause. The initial reaction to doing something similar was: "You've got to be kidding. We can't do that," says Ginny Mitchell, the major force behind the project. But before she knew it, she had 20 women willing to undress for the camera and was getting a fast education in photography, layout and design and the printing business.

Mitchell's goals are a little less lofty than the British group. She's hoping to raise \$40,000 for the Sistership group in Calgary. Already it's been more successful than any of their other fund-raising drives. In less than a month after the calendar was released, they had sold almost 2,000 copies. Recently, Calgary's Chapters stores started carrying the calendars and Mitchell has hopes that Chapters will begin selling them across Canada.

Like any business venture, they needed some start-up money to get the project underway. It was going to cost \$8,000 to fund the project and Mitchell wanted to have at least \$5,000 before pushing ahead. One of the major donations came from the Zumwalt family, a private contribution that

left her close to tears. "It was the big turning point for me," she says. Assistance also came in the form of breaks on the cost of printing and photography, which were done by Sundog Printing and Photography by Alexis, respectively.

So how did Mitchell, the November "pin-up", find the courage, not only to pose for the calendar, but also to organize the effort? I have done things that probably I never would have done before I had breast cancer," she says. "I'm moving way out of my comfort zone in all sorts of things and finding that, hey, I can do it."

And you truly begin to understand her courage when she recounts her own battle with breast cancer. Diagnosed three years ago at age 37, the cancer had already spread to her lymph nodes. She survived aggressive chemotherapy, radiation, and a mastectomy, followed two years later by a prophylactic mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. But the battle is far from over. "This spring the cancer has been diagnosed as spreading to my bones, which is not good news," she says. "But I have hope."

And thanks to her, so do many others.

Ginny Mitchell

