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Women Take It Off for Good Cause

Fundraiser keeps paddling team afloat

Carolyn Parks says modelling nude is an exercise in courage and self-confidence.

CREDIT: Mikael Kjellstrom, Calgary Herald. Illustration: Steve Young, Calgary Herald

Hollywood may not have come knocking, but that's not going to stop Calgary's own "calendar girls" from doffing their clothes to support their breast cancer initiative.

In fact, the local babes of breast cancer are planning to use the story that inspired their exhibitionism -- a tale that is now a major motion picture -- to further their cause.

"We're saying: 'Hey, Canadian women take it all off for a good cause, too,' " said Carolyn Parks, one of dozens of Calgary women who have posed naked for calendars to raise money for breast cancer in the past four years.

"The movie was inspired by a true story and we're a local true story. We were the first and perhaps the only breast cancer survivors group to do a calendar like this."

Members of the Sistership dragon boat racing team are planning to gather at the cinemas at WestHills tonight from 7 p.m. to sell copies of the calendar they have produced since 2001 to raise money for their club.

Not coincidentally, the theatre is playing Calendar Girls, a new comedy inspired by the story of a group of women in Great Britain who bared all to produce a nudie calendar to raise money for leukemia research and treatment at their hospital.

Looking for a novel way to raise money for the rowing team that now includes more than 100 women, Parks said Sistership members were inspired by the story they heard about in England in 2000 and decided to do their own calendar that features tasteful black-and-white photos of team members in the buff with strategically placed dragon boat paddles.

The first version sold like hotcakes, so the team produced another for 2002 and then a 24-month edition for 2003-04.

"We've still got a few hundred of the current ones left so we're going to try to sell them and do

our best to continue raising awareness that breast cancer is still killing women and we need a solution," Parks said.

Proceeds from sales of the calendars, which are selling for \$10 each, go toward helping the team train and attend dragon boat races across Canada.

Unlike other fundraising calendars that use nudism to rake in money for charity, Parks said photo shoots for the Sistership calendar are considered a healing process for many of the models, who are coping with physical and emotional scars of breast cancer.

"Our message is quite different from a lot of the others: It's that women are more than their breasts and that we're still sensual and sensuous creatures after breast cancer," Parks said.

"For me, modelling was an exercise in courage and self-confidence. Even with your teammates, it's difficult to get naked when your body parts have been moved and you have scars all over the place.

"It gives a whole new meaning to cleavage and nudity."

The project has also led Parks to write a book about the women who took part in the team's first calendar, some of whom have since succumbed to the disease. Called: *Eye of the Dragon, Women, Cancer and Courage*, the book is scheduled to be released next month, said Parks.

"It was such an absolutely healing process that at the time we thought it would make a really great book.

"These women may be ordinary, but they are leading extraordinary lives."