

2005 – Ginny’s Sistership Tribute



I remember the first time that I met Ginny. It was over six years ago and we were at a new-members’ meeting for the wonderful Sistership dragon boat racing team. The women who were there from the first crew told us all about Sistership and started to help us to form a second crew. After a bit, they asked if any of the new women thought that they would like to captain the new crew. About twenty-four heads went down avoiding the responsibility. Not Ginny’s. Little did we know then that our Ginny would captain us for the next four years,

stopping only when she needed to slow down a little.

Ginny motivated her crew to work hard and always do their best. Her leadership inspired her crew on to great success as paddlers and she taught us how to support each other. Ginny especially took it upon herself to look after the new members of the team each year. She made sure that they felt welcome and were well taken care of. Ginny paddled with us her first year and when the bomb dropped and she was given the news of the bone metastasis, she bravely carried on as our drummer. Everyone who ever paddled on a boat with Ginny drumming knows the strength and determination she showed us. Looking up at Ginny sitting on the drummer’s seat was all the inspiration we needed at the start of a race. We had to be strong for her. We always wanted to do our best for her. If she could be so brave, we had to be as well.

And Ginny was one of the bravest women I have ever known. She faced her cancer with courage and a determination to really live each day of the time that she had left. She was realistic about her prognosis and researched everything that she could find on her illness. She knew about each and every drug and trial that she could possibly use to help to prolong her life. She

wanted to live as long as she could for her dear children Shannon, Allison, and Ian. Being courageous doesn't mean that she didn't face fear though. Ginny told me that with each new diagnosis – breast cancer, bone metastasis, lung metastasis, brain metastasis, bone marrow metastasis – and each time she learned from a C/T scan that the latest drug had stopped working, she felt like a hot knife had gone through her. She gave herself only about a day to grieve and then went back to her research to see if there was just one more drug out there somewhere that might give her some more time. When she knew that she was running out of drugs, things got harder for her. She never wasted any time feeling sorry for herself though. She said “I know that I have to die from breast cancer but I'm not dead yet and I won't die one day sooner than I have to.”

Can you even imagine all of the side effects that this woman had to endure? There have been many and Ginny faced all of them bravely. A lot of the women on our crew didn't even realize that Ginny was in perpetual treatment because she didn't complain and didn't lose her hair until her last chemotherapy, taxol. She often faced her trials with humour but sometimes the side effects couldn't be laughed away. I remember so well one year at a Sistership weekend retreat when Ginny was suffering terribly with sore hands and feet from the current chemotherapy that she was taking – Zeloda. Her hands and feet were cracked and bleeding and other teammates were soaking them and rubbing them with lotion. The only complaint that I heard from her was how sad she felt because it hurt so much that she could no longer bathe her young son, Ian. The usual side effects of nausea and baldness were not easy to endure either. Ginny and Allison made the most of her baldness the first time around when Ginny had her adjuvant chemotherapy. Allison took her to grade one for show and tell – a kind of ‘b’ is for bald thing. Ginny then went on to talk with the class about having a mother who is very ill. Who knows how many lives she helped that day. It was harder for her this last time. One of the saddest things that I have heard Ginny say was when taxol took her hair and she said “Oh, Wendy. I didn't want to die bald”. Because Ginny did so much research on breast cancer and knew so much about the latest drugs and treatments available, many of us on Sistership came to rely on her for advice about our own breast cancer. Whenever someone

had a question about their latest worry, everyone would say “Ask Dr. Ginny”. She was always generous with her time whenever one of us had a worry. She gave her precious time to help anyone who wanted it and, if she didn’t know an answer, she would research the problem until she found something. I swear that that woman knew almost as much about breast cancer as the doctors. Sometimes more.

Ginny loved to ski. I know that Dr. Walley rolled her eyes at the thought of Ginny going skiing each year. I did too and sometimes I had a nagging feeling all day when I knew that Ginny was out skiing. Because she had bone metastasis, of course her bones were not as strong as they once were. I wondered how many bones she would break this time. And she did break bones. But did she quit skiing? Of course not. Ginny didn’t want her children to live in fear wondering when their mother might die. Ginny’s three children have grown up with their mom having cancer. They can hardly remember a time when their mom did not have cancer. Ginny did not let her children grow up with the fear of her death, however. She made sure that her children had a normal and happy childhood. She wanted her kids to remember her having fun. What’s a broken bone when compared to that? “I’m still here”. That was her motto and she lived by it daily. A few years ago, she broke her arm skiing in May and was back dragonboating in June. She went to the Vancouver festival that year in June and when trying to climb into the drummer’s seat she bumped her still very-sore arm. She almost passed out and fell into the boat. Did she stop drumming? Of course not. She did, however, scare the daylights out of the team. For the rest of that weekend in Vancouver, every time that we had to load the boat, sometimes climbing over 10 boats to get to ours, you could feel the whole crew holding their breath until Ginny was safely in the drummer’s seat.

I want to tell you a dragonboat story involving Ginny’s sense of black humour. The first-place winning team of the breast cancer race in Kelowna is given a beautiful cup called ‘The Survivors’ Cup’. A couple of years ago in Kelowna we were at the starting line and about to begin our most-important race of the festival – the breast cancer race. We were all very focused, nervous, and looking up at Ginny for last-minute instructions. She called out

to her crew: “O.K. you guys. This is the survivors’ cup race. That means that if we win this race, I will survive.” Talk about pressure! I know that I paddled like I’d never paddled before. And you know what? We won that race. There were nine boats in that race and we were long-shots - but we won. I still think that Ginny scared us into winning the cup that day.

I was pretty good myself at dishing out the black humour to Ginny. And so was Leona, as you’ll see from this next story. It took place in the locker room of the Eau Claire YMCA a few years back when we first all got our Sistership vests. They were quite expensive and Ginny was hemming and hawing about whether or not she should buy one. I told her that she would be dead in ten years and that she should buy the damn vest if she wanted it. Well, such a hush fell over the locker room that you could have heard a pin drop. I had dared to mention the fact that Ginny was going to die. Everyone looked at Ginny and ... she started to laugh. Our dear Leona, who also had metastasized, picked up Ginny’s sense of humour and started in on her. “How did she get ten years? If she’s getting ten years, then I want ten years. Who’s her doctor, anyway? Maybe she can get **me** ten years.” Of course, with Leona carrying on like this, the whole locker room cracked up. We had a belly-full that evening - the kind of laughter where you cover your mouth because you look so stupid. I’m glad to say that Ginny got her vest. I’m sad to say that neither Ginny nor Leona got their ten years.

When Sistership first started talking about producing a nude calendar, Ginny was there front and centre. I remember walking around the gym with her and Kathy Ingraham. We were discussing the calendar and I was rather frightened about the whole idea of it. I envisioned a sort of medical documentary – you know, “this is what a lumpectomy, segmental, mastectomy, etc. looks like...” “Oh no”, said Ginny. “This is going to be so much more than that. This is going to show the world that women are still beautiful after having had breast cancer. This is going to show the world that we are sensual, sexual human beings”. Ginny was able to see the good this calendar would do for the women of Sistership and also see how we could make a lot of money for our cause. For the next year, Ginny headed up the calendar committee and worked tirelessly to put this huge project together. I remember well the day

that she and Marlene went to be the first to have their nude pictures taken so that the rest of us could see that it wasn't so hard to do. Once again, she proved to me to be about as brave as a person could be. In the end, she put together a most beautiful calendar which raised over \$25,000 for Sistership. She then went on to head the committee to organize taking two Sistership crews to Toronto for a wonderful dragonboat festival and breast cancer conference. She never seemed to tire. I know now that this calendar had another special meaning for Ginny. She wanted to leave something for her children to be able to see, to touch, to say "My mom did that".

And then there's Jeff. Always Jeff. Ginny did not have to take one step of this trial alone because of the support of her wonderful husband, Jeff. Jeff was right there beside her through the highs and lows that this terrible disease brings to us. If I had one wish for women who have to die from breast cancer, it would be that they have someone like Jeff beside them all the way to share their fears. Ginny has shared with me, Jeff, her worries about how hard it will be for you to bring up your three children alone. She has also shared with me her confidence in you that you will continue to do the wonderful job that you two began together. You and Ginny have given your children the foundation for living their lives to the fullest. Now, you have to carry on by yourself. Of course it won't be easy. Of course you will be fine.

Our first Sistership President, Jennifer Sass, once said that to be allowed into someone's life when they are facing death is an honour and a privilege. Being Ginny's friend over the past few years, being allowed to share with her some of her joys and worries, has been an honour and a privilege.