

## 2006 – Jennifer Sass’s Sistership Tribute by Kim Blaikie



I would like to share with you my memories of Jennifer and how the Sistership Dragonboat Racing team came to be.

It was in the fall of 1997 when a woman named Suzn Morgan read an article about a team of Vancouver women with breast cancer who had competed in the dragon boat festival there. Since she was undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre at the time, she wanted to get a team started here as well. Suzn received assistance from a number of people, chief among them was Dr. Peter Geggie, her oncologist. Peter approached a number of his patients about this idea and one was my sister, Kelly, who had been dragonboating for many years before her breast cancer diagnosis. He knew she was a dragon boater because he had to arrange Kelly's treatments around her race schedule the previous summer.

Anyway, Kelly brought me to that first meeting of fifteen women. Normally, not much of a talker, she had to describe what a dragon boat was, as many of the women had never even seen one, never mind raced one

It is always fascinating to me to watch the interplay among a group of people. Fifteen breast cancer survivors in one room act pretty much like any other group of fifteen strangers put into a room to plan an event. There are the talkers, the listeners, the doers, the persuasive arguers, the planners ..... but in that room there was an exceptional facilitator. She made sure everyone had a say, she asked more questions than she answered, she played back our ideas until they became a plan. You know I'm talking about Jennifer.

Jennifer was on our first organizing committee and, later, our first president. She was our first 'press agent' and wrote two full-page stories in the Calgary Herald in our first year. She was the author/editor of our first mission statement:

## *Sistership*

*We have come together as Sistership –  
to finish the race.*

*Working together as a team  
and sharing the commitment of preparation  
is how we win.*

*We have come together as Sistership –  
to break the silence of cancer,  
to reaffirm ourselves, and to demonstrate to others  
that cancer brings about a change in life,  
not always an end to it.*

*We have come together as Sistership –  
to share something of ourselves with each other.  
Cancer can be a lonely experience,  
but it shouldn't be experienced alone.*

*We have come together as Sistership –  
to motivate ourselves and each other  
through our group involvement  
and to laugh together  
as we exercise a healthy lifestyle.*

*We have come together as Sistership –  
to learn to trust our bodies again,  
to banish "the enemy within"  
and to see ourselves as vital, healthy women  
with a race to finish.*

Jennifer wasn't all business. The Edmonton dragon boat races usually coincide with the Fringe Festival up there. I remember some pretty outrageous times, but we gals have taken that "what happens on the road stays on the road" pledge and I'd like to keep my membership ....

The name Sistership came out of a brainstorming session - we came up with some good names, too, like Breast Friends and The Young and the Breastless. We were throwing all kinds of names around but, when Suzn came up with the name Sistership, the whole room went quiet and we just knew .... Only later would we come to know the depth and richness of the name we had chosen. I started out with one sister on the team and ended up with many more.



In Jennifer's own words from her Calgary Herald article Aug. 1, 1998:

"There is something deeply satisfying about paddling in unison with those who share a common bond. The paddlers must work together, in order to move the boat.

And when one paddler falters, the others truly understand the reasons why. This has been the real victory of Sistership, the Dragonboat Team."