

Sistership: The Gift of Support

By Kim Blaikie, Past President of the Sistership Dragonboat Association

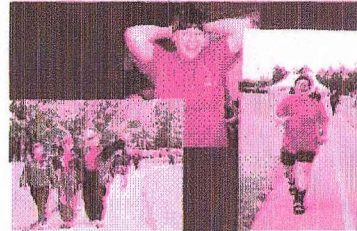


PURPOSE: To describe the evolution and impact of a peer developed, peer run group whose purpose is dragon boating, but whose gift is support.

INTRODUCTION: Sistership is a group of dynamic women living with breast cancer, who have joined together to help themselves, and each other, through dragon boating. Dragon boating is a water sport of ancient origin, combining twenty paddlers, two abreast, with a steersperson and a drummer. The object is to paddle a 500-meter course in complete unison, in about three minutes. Sistership was formed in 1998 when two dozen women, virtual strangers, met with the idea that we could improve our fitness, learn to paddle, and compete in a festival in the same year. We were drawn together by sport, challenge, and the recognition that medical care was just one piece of our recovery puzzle.

Those of us living with breast cancer wanted to help ourselves reclaim our bodies, and defeat the idea of fragility. But the nature of dragon boating did more than just strengthen our bodies. Through paddling together, we came to know one another by sharing our stories, our fears, and finally our hearts. We surprised ourselves with a provincial championship our first year out, we rallied the support of our community through our determination. And through the death of one of our team members at the end of our first season, we took a step along one of the most remarkable paths of our accidental support group - we began to learn to grieve our friends, by celebrating their lives.

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.



"I don't see it as a place where you sit around and talk about breast cancer. I want to be around people who are stepping up to life!"

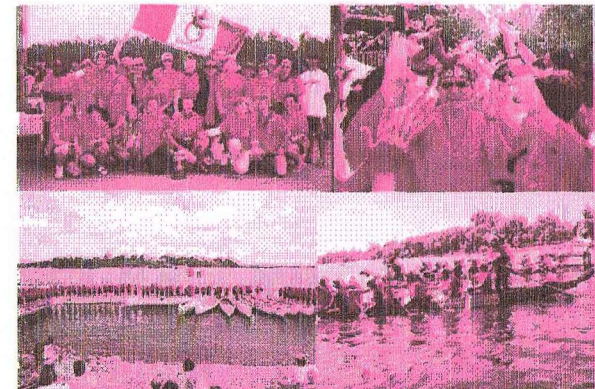
We have come together as Sistership – to motivate ourselves and each other through our group involvement, and to laugh together as we exercise a healthy lifestyle.



We have come together as Sistership – to 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.

"I joked to Ginny that she should buy the damn vest if she wanted it because she'd be dead in ten years and she better have some pleasure now. Some people froze in horror...Ginny started laughing and then Leona said, 'What makes you think that she has ten years? Who gave her ten years? If she's getting ten years, then I want ten years...I want that doctor!...'We got more and more hysterical the more Leona carried on. You know the kind of laughter where you can't stop and your sides hurt and you want to cover your mouth because you look so stupid and it just feels great."

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.



Photographers Charlene Waldel, Darrel Lewis, Paul Dever, Joyce Geldrich
Funding and support has been provided by the Sistership Dragonboat Association

History

The first ever breast cancer dragon boat team, Abreast in a Boat, was organized in Vancouver, BC. A sports medicine doctor, Dr. Don MacKenzie wanted to challenge the standard of care, which dictated that breast cancer patients should not partake in strenuous upper body activity for fear of developing painful swelling of their affected chest and arm. (lymphedema). Abreast in a Boat soon captured the hearts of the nation as their success was recorded in newspapers and magazines across Canada.

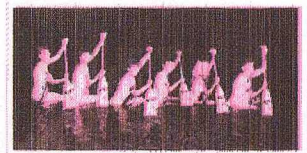
Breast cancer patients in Calgary were not to be outdone. In the winter of 1997 a few interested women came together with the help of the Canadian Cancer Society and Dr. Peter Geggie of the Tom Baker Cancer Centre. We soon had enough women to form a team and the name Sistership was chosen.

We were not jocks! We just wanted to get healthy. But we also wanted to be a team. We needed an identity: so we invented a logo, had some t-shirts made, and treated ourselves to a team jacket. Two physiotherapists and two professional trainers volunteered to guide us along the path to fitness. Only one member of Sistership had paddled before – she became our drummer and helped us find a coach.

Many of our families had suffered financially through our cancer treatments and recovery. It was important that members should not have to feel guilty about spending money on themselves. We looked for funding and found a generous sponsor in the Alberta Branch of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation.

In our second year almost 30 new members were added, and in our third year, 30 more. Sistership is now an organization of almost 100 women. We have 3 full dragonboat crews, our home teams are: Sistership One, Sistership Courage, and Sistership Dragonhearts. When we travel to other venues the crews are made up from Sistership members as a whole.

SISTERSHIP WOMEN, CANCER & COURAGE



2003-2004

CALGARY CANADA



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.

"Hugging one another every time we meet is the most important ritual to me."



"It's hard when someone is in trouble but you can't hide from it. You have to find extra courage to face whatever this world throws at you. Sistership helps me do this."

I wish to thank Sistership members Carol O'Leaherty, Jennifer Gregory, Ailie Fata, Marilyn Bayes, Wendy McLeish, Madeleine Gravel, Frankie Poulain, Gillian Kydd, Susan Denike, Donna Szentmiklosy and Jennifer Sass for their heartfelt contributions to this work.