

The Sistership Experience of Grief and Loss

By Kim Blaikie, Past President of the Sistership Dragonboat Association



Abstract
PURPOSE: To share how a large peer-run breast cancer group has coped with repeated loss over a five-year period.
INTRODUCTION: The Sistership Dragonboat team is a Calgary success story. From our humble beginnings 5 years ago, to our present state as a registered charity with nearly 100 members, Sistership is identified as a group of sassy, active women. We are proud of this image and feel our projection of a healthy life style after breast cancer diagnosis is an important message. However, there is another side to this fun and competition. Sistership has experienced the deaths of many of our team members as well as our first team physician. How do we cope with such losses? How and why do we continue to exist when these losses come so frequently? I hope to share with you some of the rituals and philosophies surrounding death and loss expressed by these remarkable women.

We have come together as Sistership to finish the race.

We lost our first sister six weeks after competing in our first dragon boat festival. Kelly was our drummer and first captain. The team decided to wear their racing headbands on their arms to show solidarity with each other and to identify themselves to Kelly's family. One of our members, a lay minister, conducted the service. A song by Garth Brooks, entitled "The River" was played as Kelly had requested. Our beautiful first place trophy was filled with flowers. A dragonboat drum was used during her service. The very tones that had exhorted us to victory only weeks before, now marked the depth of our grief. Sistership was only beginning to learn that there would be an emotional toll for belonging to this special club.

We participated in our first "breast cancer race" in Vancouver, the home of the first ever breast cancer dragon boat team, Abreast in a Boat. There were 10 boats in False Creek that afternoon; a total of 250 women with breast cancer, racing against their true adversary "lane 11" - breast cancer. The boats rafted together at the finish line to make a sea of pink by throwing carnations into the water. The drifting petals symbolized the women who have died from this tragic disease. As we paddled back to the dock, a woman stood on the rocks in the mist and the rain, singing to us in a clear, magical voice. As the words of "The River" reached us, the exhausted women in the boat cried, feeling our sister's spirit touching us ever so gently and kindly. It felt as though she was thanking us for our perseverance.

Seven more of Sistership's women have died since that race: Bev, Michelle, Brenda, Nancy, Kathleen, Gail and Leona. A number of women are back in treatment due to worsening disease. When a member becomes ill, there always seems to be a few of the woman's team mates ready to organize the rest of us into helping with support, transportation, over-night companionship, food, and in one case, locating bone marrow and blood donors.

The Flower Ceremony



"I bawl my eyes out at the ceremony, but it's a good cry. It's a cry of release, to really let it all hang out. I'm crying for everyone that has ever had to deal with this beast and I'm crying for myself."

"My flower is my sister who died from breast cancer after our first season. It is the time every year when we have a little chat"

"I was in Romania when Gail died. I bought a flower and spread the petals in a fountain at a time I knew my team mates were doing the same thing. I felt such a strong connection! When I was done there was such a sense of peace..."

"This is one time when all teams come together with the heart. The spirit of those no longer with us seems to be there at that moment."



"The tragedy is why is this happening?...Let's get beyond the cheerfulness and the bravery and the pink jewelry. Let's find out what is really happening to these fabulous women, too many of whom die."

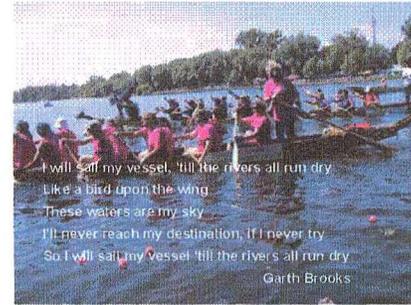
"I don't want to live my last years frightened the way I was... I want to live until the end. I don't want to die one day sooner than I have to...many women of Sistership paddle almost until the end. If I have to die, I want to die like they did - brave and strong until the end."



"For me, I know that I will not be alone when I am called and this gives me great peace of mind."



Honouring Gail's family before the paddle by.



I will sail my vessel, 'till the rivers all run dry
 Like a bird upon the wing
 These waters are my sky
 I'll never reach my destination, if I never try
 So I will sail my vessel, 'till the rivers all run dry
 Garth Brooks

"That really hit home, watching strangers who had come to watch a bunch of races and got to also watch this...I think it really moved them...It was great to be a part of a group of women honoring and being honored...and also to be able to be emotional...I mean we're all crying and it's public...and it's fine and your right back to that place of honoring"

Memorials

The women of Sistership are memorialized in many other ways. We all wear a ribbon on the sleeve of our T-shirts for each member who has died.

Sistership members purchased a memorial bench that overlooks our race course on the Glenmore reservoir.

We have participated in the funeral services of many of our team mates, and have invited families and friends to a special service on the reservoir, known as a "paddle by".

"I hope that somewhere along the way I discover how they come to accept what is happening to them and face it with such courage and dignity."



"Death is always difficult to face but as a close group we talk and heal"



The comfort quilt at Leona's service made from Sistership T-shirts by Madeleine and her friend.

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