

Breast cancer survivors a picture of fitness and strength in dragon boat races



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Deidre Palik and her team of breast cancer survivors are ready for this weekend's Dragon Boat races in Calgary, Ab., on Thursday August 11, 2016. MIKE DREW / POSTMEDIA

In what is often a strenuous test of fitness and strength, Diedre Palik revels in the chance to show what she can still accomplish as a 69-year-old breast cancer survivor.

She will join the Calgary Sistership Breast Cancer Survivors teams this weekend on the Glenmore Reservoir, part of the spectacular annual Calgary Dragon Boat Race and Festival.

Along with an international cultural celebration of Chinese history dating back more than 2,500 years, Calgary's event will include up to 58 total teams this year, 12 of which are from out of town.

Palik and her sisterhood of 43 other survivors will fill two boats, displaying their impressive physical abilities in spite of the ravages of the cancer they once faced. A third survivors boat will also compete from out of town.

"It's still so amazing to me that every year, as survivors, we are able to enter our boats and engage in mixed competition," Palik says.

"And we can show our families that we can do this — and physically, concretely show them that in fact we are fine and they don't need to worry about us anymore.

"It gives us back control of our bodies, the control that cancer once took away."

The creation of the “Sistership Boats” is credited to Vancouver-based physician Dr. Don McKenzie, who wanted to challenge a long-held belief within the medical community that women who once faced breast cancer should avoid upper-body exercises. Too much strain had been believed to encourage lymphedema, a buildup of lymph fluids under the skin.



Deidre Palik – in the bow on the right – and her team of breast cancer survivors are ready for this weekend’s Dragon Boat races in Calgary. MIKE DREW / POSTMEDIA

McKenzie launched a medical study that carefully monitored a group of breast cancer survivors in a special exercise and training program. After no new cases of lymphedema were found, the Sistership was created and has since grown to include five boats based in Vancouver and many others in Canada and around the world.

“He instinctively knew that it just didn’t make sense that survivors should stop doing all things that all other science said was in fact very healthy,” said Palik.

Palik was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006, at the age of 59. Because of her commitment to regular mammograms, her cancer was discovered at a very early stage, requiring surgery but no radiation or chemotherapy.

“I know there has been a lot of controversy and discussion around mammograms recently. But I know that my mammogram saved my life.”

She encourages all women over 50 to get regular mammograms, and discuss the benefits with their doctor.

As one of the city’s premier sports festivals, the 2016 Calgary Dragon Boat Race and Festival will celebrate its 25th anniversary, drawing more than 1,850 competitors and 4,000 spectators, and featuring other events including live bands and cultural entertainment.

The Calgary Sistership will also hold a special “pink flower” ceremony Saturday at 11:20 a.m. honouring all breast cancer survivors and those who have died of the disease.