

# Calgary women slay breast cancer dragon

JENNIFER SASS  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

## Disease survivors getting in shape to compete at festival

Just after lunch every Tuesday afternoon, about two dozen women, ranging in age from 34 to 71, begin arriving at the South YMCA for one of their three weekly group workouts.

They're all members of the Alberta Breast Cancer Foundation sponsored Sistership Dragonboat Racing Team, but most are not athletes, and many are not even in very good shape — yet. They came together this winter as strangers, but with two things in common — they've all had cancer, and they all want to paddle together in July's Dragonboat Festival on Glenmore Reservoir.

Suzn Morgan starts her workout on a treadmill. The first time she ever saw a Dragonboat in action was the summer of 1997, when she took in Calgary's annual races with family and friends.

She recalls being struck by the energy of the paddling teams and the speed with which they propelled those boats through the water. But the memory of that relaxed holiday weekend was soon replaced with tension and fear when, just days later, the 44-year-old Morgan was diagnosed with the cancer that would steal her breast, sap her energy, and shake her world.

And it wasn't until she was well past her mastectomy surgery, and into chemotherapy that autumn, that she made the connection between her breast cancer — and the Dragonboat races.

"While I was in treatment, I read a couple of articles about the Dragonboat Festival in Vancouver, and the women there with breast cancer who competed," Morgan says, "and I thought — we can do that here!"

The articles she read were about Abreast in a Boat, a team put together in 1996 by sports medicine physician Dr. Don McKenzie from the University of British Columbia. McKenzie was concerned that women who had undergone breast surgery were being given faulty information about what kinds of exercise they could do, after recovery.

Most were told to avoid activities involving the upper body, for fear of triggering lymphedema, a painful swelling of the arm that can occur in patients where lymph nodes have been removed.

But since there was no published research supporting that restriction, McKenzie decided to run a study of his own — using women with breast cancer, and a Dragonboat as his lab.

The Dragonboat was an ideal venue for the study — the paddling is strenuous, repetitive upper body exercise, and the size of the teams — more than 20 women — gave him large numbers to work with.

Now, McKenzie's goal may have been to show that women can take part in all kinds of exercise after breast surgery, but the real result of the study seems to have been to show that

Dragonboating works on many levels, as a kind of 'floating support group' for women with breast cancer.

There are now three such teams in Vancouver, and this summer, there'll be Sistership, on Glenmore Reservoir.

The more Morgan read about the Dragonboat team, the more convinced she became that the women of Calgary needed one. And, Morgan herself says she needed a "cause", something to give her the inspiration to help her make the lifestyle changes she wanted to make.

"I needed to get fit," she said, "and I'd been reading about how support groups can sometimes increase your life expectancy after a cancer diagnosis. As well, my faith in the future had been shaken — I really needed something to plan for, and putting together a Dragonboat team seemed right for all my goals — fitness, a support group, and something to look forward to."

Morgan went to the Calgary and District Unit Office of the Canadian Cancer Society. Patient Services. Co-ordinator Jennifer Duncan was captivated with the idea, and eager for the CCS to have a role in it. "We're committed to supporting the needs of people with can-

cer," says Duncan, "and we're particularly supportive of survivor-driven initiatives, like the Dragonboat."

The CCS helped Morgan get training manuals and videos from the Vancouver team — circulated notices to their breast cancer support groups, supplied meeting space, and helped to line up coaches, a physiotherapist, and a medical adviser.

There were 15 women at the first meeting in January — the majority of them had never even seen a Dragonboat before, and none had much of an idea about what they'd have to do, to get ready to paddle.

It has fallen to Cindy Fisher, the volunteer dry land trainer, to whip this team into shape. Fisher, a private exercise consultant with her own company, CF Essentials, set up the training schedule — cardiovascular exercise, flexibility, and weight training three times a week as a group — and 2 or 3 times for each woman on her own.

She located a couple of gyms willing to donate their facilities — the South YMCA for the Tuesday sessions, and the Heritage Square Fitness Club on Thursday evenings. The team is still looking for a permanent Sunday morning workout spot.

But once the ice leaves the reservoir, there will be on-water training with paddling coaches. Kathleen Kranenburg and Mike Paddon.

Paddon, a Dragonboat participant for the past seven years, was recruited by the only Sistership team member with actual experience in the sport, drummer Kelly Bryan.

Paddon was excited about working with a group of women living with cancer — having undergone rigorous treatment for bone cancer himself, a decade ago.

Kranenburg, an exercise physiology technician with the National Sport Centre, and a long time rower and Dragonboat paddler found out about the project, and brought both her coaching expertise, and a principal sponsor, the Alberta Breast Cancer Foundation.

Dragonboating is not inexpensive — there are entry fees and many on-water training sessions to pay for, especially for a team with no experience. And Sistership, made up primarily of women with breast cancer, has some specialized needs — like expensive, customized pressure sleeves, for those women at risk for lymphedema.

But deciding to sponsor the team was an easy decision for the Alberta Breast Cancer Foundation.

Vicki Kranenburg, the founding director of the Foundation's Calgary Chapter, and, not coincidentally, the mother of coach Kathleen — says she was able to see a good fit between Sistership and the ABCF, right away.

"We think this is an incredible project that will bring cancer patients together, to challenge them physically, mentally and emotionally," Kranenburg says.

"Our foundation is committed to fighting breast cancer by supporting research and patient services.

"These women are fighting their cancer by challenging it, and showing us all that there can be a healthy, productive life after breast cancer."

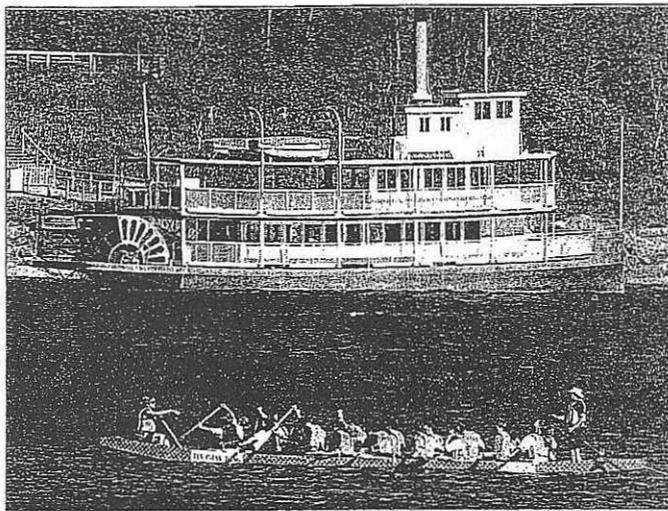
Early on in their life as a team, the women Sistership recognized that their goal was to finish the race, both in Dragonboating, and in dealing with their cancer, because for most women, breast cancer is a chronic disease, and the race is ongoing.

And in case any one of them forget that they were reminded at their last Tuesday practice. One of the team members has had a recurrence, and will be leaving training for awhile, for more treatment.

In the meantime, Sistership continues to prepare for the festival, the last weekend in July.

And, as they've said in their goals, they'll be paddling as a team to help break the silence that surrounds this disease, and to demonstrate to themselves and others, that cancer brings about a change to life — not always an end to it.

Sass is a member of the Sistership Dragonboat team.



Larry MacDougal, Calgary Herald  
Heritage Park's Moyle looks on as a Dragonboat crew practises for the races last year.