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# Dragon boating an escape for breast-cancer patients

## Sistership's focus is on healthy living

Breast cancer may be the common link between paddlers in Calgary's Sistership dragon boat team, but it's not something they talk about much.



Thandi Fletcher/calgary Herald

**Deidre Palik, a paddler with the Sistership Dragon Boat Association, practises with the team for the Calgary Dragon Boat Race and Festival taking place this weekend. Sistership is made up of breast cancer patients in Calgary.**

"I'd say cancer brought us together," said paddler Deidre Palik, "but for the most part, it's just about getting on with dragon boating."

Founded in 1998, Sistership is a competitive dragon boat team made up of breast cancer survivors

in Calgary.

The team is racing in the Calgary Dragon Boat Race and Festival, taking place Aug. 25 and 26 at North Glenmore Park.

Dragon boating is a popular sport among women with a history of breast cancer. The movement was sparked in 1996 when Vancouver sports medicine specialist Dr. Don McKenzie brought together 24 breast cancer patients to form a dragon boat team. At the time, doctors recommended breast cancer patients limit exercising their upper bodies to prevent lymphedema, a painful condition that can develop after breast surgery that causes swelling of the arm and chest.

But McKenzie wanted to test that theory and see whether the repetitive, upper body exercise of paddling could actually prevent lymphedema. None of the women developed the condition from paddling.

In 1998, McKenzie wrote an article about the team that was published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal. Since then, dragon boating for breast cancer patients has grown into a worldwide movement, with more than 150 teams sprouting up in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and many other countries.

That same year, Sistership started in Calgary, inspired by the original Vancouver group. Since then, more than 200 breast cancer patients have signed up to try their hand at the sport.

But Palik is quick to say Sistership is not a cancer support group. While teammates will lend an ear if someone is going through a difficult time, she said the mandate is "more about healthy living and getting on with it." Once the team pushes off from the dock, paddling is their escape from breast cancer, she said.

"A lot of these girls have never been on a sports team before," she said. "When they get on the boat, not only do they find a way to survive, they find a way to thrive."

Palik, who has been paddling for six years, said the sport transformed her life. From the moment she attended her first meeting, she felt connected to the sport. "I felt like it was the reason that I had been presented with breast cancer," Palik said. "Honestly, it was like the gate to a whole new piece of my life."

As soon as the ice melts on Calgary's Glenmore Reservoir, Palik said the paddlers and their coach are on the water. The team competes in about four festivals a year, and has raced in cities across Canada, from Victoria, B.C., to Sydney, N.S. They don't always win, but Palik said winning for them "is the mere fact that we're in a boat, too."

Since they began, Palik said the team has lost more than a boat load of its members to the disease. "It can be difficult," she said, her voice breaking with emotion. "A couple of years ago, we lost a very dear member. But she was so competitive, truly to honour her, you get back in that boat and you keep fighting."

Before racing against other breast cancer dragon boat teams, Sistership releases 22 doves, signifying the number of seats in a dragon boat, to honour paddlers whose lives were claimed by the disease. The ceremony, taking place 11:20 a.m. Sunday, is emotional, Palik said, but it also helps send a message that a breast cancer diagnosis isn't a death sentence.

"They can see that despite the fact that we're all very emotional at this moment, that there's strength in us, that there's a day after breast cancer and a life after breast cancer," she said. "What we want to give out and express is hope."

Danny Ng, co-chair of Calgary Dragon Boat Society, said he was touched the first time he saw the dove ceremony.



"It hits you in the heart to see something like that, knowing where they came from," said Ng. "Through all the hardship, they bond together through the sport of dragon boating."

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