

# Pulling to VICTORY

## Cancer survivors team up to win Dragonboat Race

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

In the April 18th edition of the Calgary Herald, writer Jennifer Sass first told of her experience with Sistership, the Dragonboat team — and their efforts to get in shape and prepare for the seventh annual Calgary Dragonboat Festival, held last weekend at Glenmore Park. Here is her account of the event.

In this chapter of the Sistership story, the happy ending comes first.

Sistership, the Dragonboat Team, paddled its way to a three race win — including a heart-in-your-mouth tenth of a second victory in the final heat late Sunday afternoon — to capture both the Alberta Women's Championship and the Sportsmanship Trophy at last weekend's 7th Annual Dragonboat Festival on Glenmore Reservoir. And the Sistership team did it, in its very first year of competition.

To the casual observer, Sistership is a team of women who've spent the last half year together, learning the ancient sport of dragonboating — a diverse group both in age and background, who laugh, banter, tease one another and work hard, just like every other team on Glenmore Reservoir. But there's something more to Sistership — we all share a history with cancer, primarily breast cancer. And the whole experience of dragonboating — of taking up a brand new challenge with people who've all been through the same life altering jolt, has meant Sistership has become as much a floating support group, as a team.

But make no mistake, Sistership is a team — a team of 24 motivated women committed to propelling two thousand pounds of boat across 650 metres of water, in as short a time as possible. Now keep in mind, we've all battled cancer — so we don't like to lose. Judging by the cheers on-shore, thousands of others didn't want us to lose, either. Sponsored principally by the Alberta Chapter of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, and supported by an astoundingly wide circle of family, friends, neighbors, workmates and complete strangers, the women of Sis-

tership demonstrated that, with enough will, you can find a way.

Betty Tait, whose breast cancer was diagnosed a little more than a year ago, says she got involved with Sistership to help normalize her life again, and dispel some of the darkness she felt.

"I had just finished my treatment and I felt like my body didn't belong to me any longer, so part of it was to claim my body back," the 55-year-old paddler said. "And then along the way I met all these wonderful people — and now I don't think about dying anymore. I think about living."

That desire to regain control of your body — which oftentimes begins to feel like a foreign country during the surgical and treatment phase of cancer — is common.

"Breast cancer is what brought us together," says team member Kimberly Motz, diagnosed two years ago at the age of 34, "but it's not what's keeping us here now. Now, it's not about the disease — it's about taking control of our lives."

"When we're in that boat, we're not cancer patients anymore," says Carole Parks — tennis player, all around athlete, and a seven-year veteran of the disease. "We're Dragonboat queens! I love it!"

Dragonboat queens indeed. We began a half year ago as a relatively out of

shape group of women in their middle ages. Some were, and still are, in active cancer treatment. For others, that experience is now a bad memory. But on Saturday, for our very first race, we stepped into that boat as a team, in the truest sense of the word. In dragonboating, everyone has to pull together in unison, or the boat just flounders.

We surprised ourselves during that first race. We were nervous and excited. We really didn't know what to expect, and there we were at the start line with a boat on either side filled with women who all looked a lot younger, and maybe more fit. But we made a good start, relaxed into the precise unified stroke pattern that is good dragonboating, and won with our best time ever.

"I'm not an athlete — I've always been the one picked 'last'," laughs paddler Brenwyn Cooley — new to both

Calgary, and to cancer. "But now I've got a whole new lease on how I feel about my body, and my life. In this team, everybody contributed, and everybody is important."

For Brenda Campbell, the sport itself wasn't really the whole point of her involvement.

"I wanted to focus on something cancer-based that was positive," she says.

"It was important to me to see 20 odd women — all with a previous cancer diagnosis — all now engaged in living."

It was that same focus on living that provided the reward for paddler Nadia Eitzen. Eitzen, a vital and involved grandmother, (who sat in the rear of the boat Sunday for our second victory) remembers the bitterness she developed with her cancer diagnosis. She lost a brother to the disease, and now watches a nephew struggle. Eitzen says her involvement with the team has helped her put things into better perspective.

"The companionship of these women, just being able to talk to someone who understands exactly what I'm going through, has really been good for me."

Paddler Kim Blaikie, who at 43 has had two bouts of breast cancer, is joined on the team by her sister, drummer Kelly Bryan. Bryan is 42. She's spent the past six

years battling her recurrent cancer, and the past five years dragonboating with the Calines team. Blaikie says she started on the team with one each, and ended up with 23 says she's learned how to look at aspects of cancer that were painful.

"We were talking about our names in our jackets so we didn't get them mixed up," she says, "and then someone jokingly having to put our names in these so we wouldn't get it up too. And I thought, you know, I felt so alone. I had to be a body part and it was horrible then here we all are laughing about the possibility of getting it. We're all here, and we're all in the same boat."

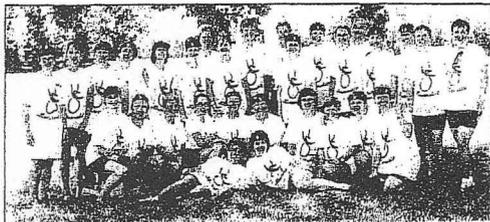
It was Kelly Bryan's job to team focused, especially during the third and final race, a churning affair won by no breath and sheer will. But it was enough to lock up the Alberta Women's Championship as the happiest of endings to the chapter of the Sistership story.

There have been waves, a voyage of Sistership. During training, one woman's cancer ended, but she willed herself drummer's seat whenever. sive treatments would permit spring, another of our paddlers had grim news about the prostate disease — still, she was there in all weather, sometimes and exhausted to do much be with friends.

And by summer, just as Sistership was fine tuning its strong power surges, still another dark water again, and went chemotherapy just a few days before the race began.

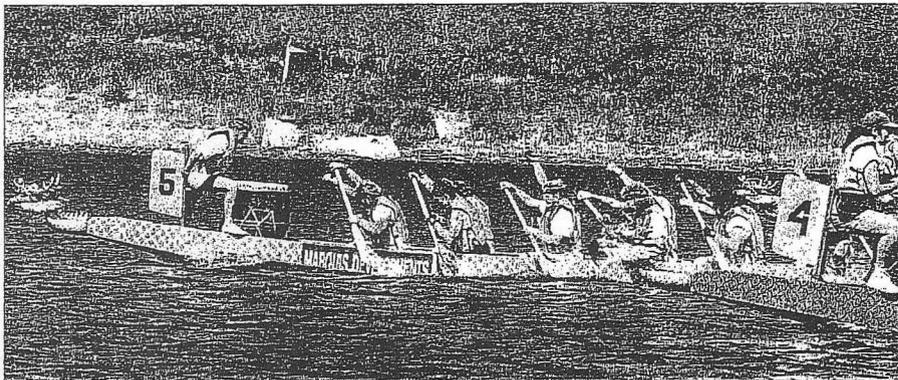
There is something deep about paddling in unison with who share a common bond. Drummers must work together, to move the boat.

And when one paddler finds others truly understand the why. This has been the real Sistership, the Dragonboat



Sistership poses for team picture before racing.

Bruce Pickering



Kelly Bryan, pounding the drum, shouts encouragement to the Sistership team during a Dragonboat race.

Larry MacDougal, Calgary Herald