

Hopes Ride High!
Paddling With Hope Afloat Canada Dragon Boat Team
by Joy Claydon

“It fills me up.....and refreshes my soul.” These are the words I found myself uttering with such heartfelt passion when it was my turn to answer the question: “What does being a member of the Hope Afloat Canada dragon boat team mean to you?” All members of Hope Afloat Canada were asked this question at the traditional Dotting of the Eye ceremony on June 29, 2002 at the Comox Marina, held to celebrate the arrival of our dragon boat. At that time, we had existed as a society for only six months. It had only been five weeks since we had been practicing on the water as an active dragon boat team. It surprised me that so many of my team-mates answered similarly, with just as much passion. Being a member of a breast cancer survivor dragon boat team, where we have all gone through the same gut wrenching diagnosis, faced the same fears, experienced the same or similar surgeries and treatments and come out the other side, perhaps at first, with somewhat fragile hopes for our future. We all eventually do come to terms with what has happened to us and resolve, with renewed determination, to live our lives to the fullest. This is what helps provide a special bond that exists on all breast cancer dragon boat teams.

For me, the magical journey towards becoming a member of this special team of courageous and vital women began in January of 2002. Out of the blue, one bitterly cold evening, I received a phone call from a woman I didn't know. She introduced herself as Gay Davies. She told me that my daughter-in-law, Diana, had given her my name as someone who might be interested in joining a dragon boat team, a group solely for breast cancer survivors that she, along with a handful of other determined and visionary breast cancer survivors were in the process of forming. I had never heard of dragon boats and I certainly had no idea such a sport even existed! Once Gay explained the basics of the sport to me, my initial reaction was to politely decline her offer, although I certainly had the only qualification required to belong to such a team - a personal diagnosis of breast cancer. I was a two-time breast cancer survivor. My fear was that I wasn't fit enough (images passed through my mind of super conditioned “buff” athletic women with abs of steel and powerful biceps, sitting in a canoe, expertly cutting their way through the water!) When I shared these fears with Gay, she assured me this was definitely not the case. Still, I was reticent, until she mentioned that a few women who had already joined, were in their 70's!! If I couldn't keep up with women in their 70's, I decided, I should be ashamed of myself. I was convinced. I took a deep breath and told Gay that I would attend the first official meeting that was arranged for later that month. At that first meeting, we were all given name tags, as for the most part, we were total strangers. Twenty women showed up that evening. They were from many walks of life with ages ranging from early 40's to mid 70's. Over the next few months, slowly but surely, we would come together as a team. Our lives were about to change in such wonderful, positive ways that we could not yet imagine!

The first few months were taken up with all the necessary red-tape that goes with forming a brand new charitable society. We had to vote for a team name and team colours. The necessary committees had to be formed and chaired. We knew we had a mission - and it was clear: 'Breast Cancer Awareness.' Through the sport of dragon boating, we would show that there could be "life, love and laughter" after a personal diagnosis of breast cancer.

Meanwhile, we could not call ourselves a dragon boat team until we had a dragon boat to paddle! Fundraising for our own boat began in earnest. A new dragon boat complete with paddles, life jackets, drum and drum seat would cost approximately \$24,000. We couldn't possibly raise such an enormous amount of money by the summer..... could we? Well, we hadn't reckoned on the amazing generosity of our local communities! Any idea of actually stepping into such a boat before the up-coming season was upon us seemed completely hopeless. Our first fundraising event was a garage sale which was held in the early spring in the parking lot of the Courtenay Cancer Society Office. It was a huge success. We followed this up a few weeks later with a bake sale which was another smash hit. Local service clubs got behind us and gave us great support and donations started to pour in from individuals as well as groups. Before we knew it, to our collective astonishment, we found we had enough money in the newly formed Comox Valley Dragon Boat Society's coffers to order our boat which, all being well, would be delivered just in time for us to compete in a number of the 2002 festivals. Our dream was about to come true – and so quickly. It was beyond our wildest dreams.

In May 2002, our boat was delivered to our team at the Comox Marina. Before the first droplet of salt water touched the boat, official documents were signed which legally transferred ownership of the dragon boat to the Comox Recreation Commission and they became the instant new owners of our magnificent 48' blue and white dragon boat. This legal transfer was done in the hopes that more local teams could be formed with the assistance of the Comox Recreation Commission so that the community at large might discover and experience first hand this exciting new sport. Our hope has come to fruition. Many recreational teams now exist and practice routinely out of the Comox Harbour.

During the early days, one of the most important tasks was finding a coach who could teach us the basics of the sport. We were extremely fortunate to have found Don Irvine. Don's expertise and knowledge of dragon boating is vast. He started with the False Creek program in Vancouver during the 1980's and has coached many teams to world championship levels. What are the odds of having one of the sport's finest champions living right here, in our own back yard?! Furthermore, add to these odds, the fact that he was willing to take on a team of middle-aged (and older) women in varying degrees of health and fitness. Although Don no longer coaches us, we appreciated his expert knowledge, patience and encouragement during our first 4 seasons.

He inspired us to be the very best that we can be and although at times, perhaps at least from his point of view, it might not have seemed very apparent, we always tried our best, whether it was a routine practice in the sheltered waters of Comox Harbour or placing well at an important 'away' festival. Over the past five seasons, we have gained a multitude of new skills. We have learned to become "as one" on the water. Individuality is a no-no when there are 20 of us sitting two abreast. Egos are to be left behind at the dock. Unison is the key. Once in the boat, togetherness is essential in order to move the boat efficiently and quickly through the water. The old adage comes to the fore: "There is no "I" in team".

In June of last year, the highlight for our team was when we attended the international festival solely for breast cancer survivors in Vancouver, B.C., to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the first breast cancer survivor team "Abreast in a Boat." Teams from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Poland, Italy, the United States and all across Canada attended this very special weekend. In all, 62 teams attended this event. It was a wonderful, magical two days which was filled with laughter, love, companionship, friendly (but sometimes fierce!) competition and most of all.....HOPE! Our proudest moment as a team came when we placed 4th in the world at this festival!

Our 2007 season will begin with a bang! The majority of our team members will fly to Florida to attend the Great White North Paddling Camp. We are so excited to have this amazing opportunity. It is a huge "carrot" for us to continue to stay in shape throughout the winter months. Hopefully, we will come home from Florida with renewed resolve and new skills that will see us doing well in next year's festivals!

Sadly, during the past five seasons, we have needed to say a final farewell to a couple of our team mates who have succumbed to the disease for which we fight to find a cure. On the back of the drummer's seat of our dragon boat, in honour of these women and three others who didn't live long enough to see the dream of a local breast cancer survivor team come true, their names have been engraved on a special plaques. We refer to these brave women as our "Guardian Angels" and trust that they are watching over us as we continue our mission in "Breast Cancer Awareness". Every time we practice we invariably see one or two bald eagles watching us from their lofty perch on a boat's mast or sometimes, soaring high above us, up and above the bow of the boat. We like to think our team mates who have passed on sent them our way, as if to say "Carry the banner girls, believe in the quest – and soar like eagles!"

We look forward to many more festivals and many more years...."Paddles up....and take it away!"

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