

Spirit Abreast

*the Fraser Valley's first breast cancer survivor
Dragon Boat Team*



Benefits of Dragon Boat Racing

Regular exercise has a beneficial effect on health. It represents one of the most significant health factors one can modify and control. Aside from lowering the risk of breast cancer, regular physical activity in women reduces overall mortality and the incidence of coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, osteoporosis, obesity, disability and lessens the impact of chronic problems such as arthritis and cognitive decline. Dragon boating is a physically demanding activity that combines upper body and trunk exercises with the esthetics of movement in a traditional boat. It is demanding and exhilarating work, but most importantly it is fun. The experience requires teamwork above all else and this leads to a floating support group.

In the fall of 1995, Dr. Don McKenzie, a sports medicine physician and an exercise physiologist, was conducting a research project at the Allen McGavin Sports Medicine Centre at UBC in Vancouver. This study looked at the cardio-respiratory fitness levels in two groups of women. One group had been treated for breast cancer and the other group had no history of breast cancer. The breast cancer group had many stories about the things they were not supposed to do after treatment. Much of this advice restricted activities involving the upper body because of the risk of lymphedema.



Though well-intentioned, there was no public research that supported this information. A desire to return these individuals to a normal lifestyle, as well as a lack of scientific proof to the contrary, was the impetus of Dr. McKenzie to form the first all breast cancer survivors dragon boat team. In February 1996, the first team was formed. The only criterion to join the team was a diagnosis of breast cancer. Age, athletic ability, paddling experience ... none of this mattered. Paddlers came from all walks of life. Ages ranged from 31 to 62. The women volunteered for the new challenge not knowing what problems might result. They were, and are, a very courageous group. A slow, progressive weight training and aerobic exercise programme was the starting point. The program was designed by Dr. McKenzie to meet the special needs of the group. The Abreast in a Boat Society was established. Since then many breast cancer survivor dragon boat teams have been formed across North America.