

Living life to the fullest

>> Breast cancer survivors pull together to raise awareness through Westman Waves of Hope Dragon Boat Team

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for South Mountain Press

It was simply heartbreaking to learn that in the 18 years since the "Westman Waves of Hope Dragon Boat Team (WOH)" has been in existence, 14 of their members have passed away.

But, the WOH dragon boat team isn't about death – it's about living your life to the fullest and appreciating every single day.

The team draws its members from within a 200-mile radius of Brandon and is currently comprised of 33 ladies, all of whom have fought breast cancer and survived.

As a symbol of their vitality, they've chosen to race dragon boats, while at the same time raising awareness, promoting the early detection of breast cancer and inviting those similarly afflicted to climb aboard.

Tradition dictates that a boat is always female and christened with a name to engender pride.

The WOH pink-scaled dragon boat is aptly named "Kindred Spirit," which refers to people who have been drawn together based on a deep understanding of what the other has been through – in this case, a diagnosis of breast cancer and the resultant medical experience.

Kindred Spirit is a lot bigger than she looks skimming triumphantly across the surface of the water. She is deeper than a good-sized canoe and holds 22 life-jacketed people – 20 paddlers, punctuated fore and aft by a steerer and a drummer.

The steerer calls out commands, which are repeated by the drummer, who keeps a steady beat.

One of the ladies, who didn't want to be named, said "Don't forget to mention Evelyn and Wally Clegg from Onanole. She is our 'official coach, motivator and slave driver,' and Wally is her helpful and faithful sidekick."

At the behest of WOH team member, Annette Beatty of Erickson, I attended the celebratory event held at Minnedosa Lake on July 26 designed to introduce WOH team members' families to dragon boating.

Along with other people's grandchildren, I learned to keep my flank against the gunnel, to reach and stroke, lifting the paddle out of the water when it aligned with my hip.

Speaking from experience, failure to do this correctly causes paddles to clash or the paddler behind you to get unceremoniously and repeatedly splashed!

Without the help of the slightly damp Lynda Gian-



Four ladies have been part of the dragon boat team for all 19 summers since club's inception

notti of Erickson, I would not have known what to do when I heard the terms "paddles up, hold for drift, and flare the boat." The last term means 'keep her steady,' by placing your paddle lightly on the surface of the water to reduce any tipsiness while people change positions.

Okay! Dragon boating is fun! "But, the price of admission is pretty dear," said Diane Harrington of Basswood, who has been a WOH member for 16 years. "All of us here have coped with and survived breast cancer."

I couldn't control my tears when told by Betty Stewart, the team's most

'seasoned' member at 78 years old, that if requested by the grieving family, fellow dragon boat team members will honour a lost teammate with a "paddles up" funerary honour guard and the ceremonial placing of a special bouquet. One white flower is placed to represent the deceased and then team members approach individually and add a pink bloom.

Along with Stewart, Edna Verhelst, and Joyce Johnson, who are all from Brandon, and Marg Rycroft who resides in Onanole, have been with the team for all 19 summers since the club's inception.

I spoke to several of these long-time members and others, asking, "What keeps you

motivated to continue? After all, you begin dry land training every spring, paddle May through to mid-September, travel long distances every Wednesday evening...?"

"And, furthermore, I understand that a year ago the thoughtlessness of someone in a personal watercraft produced waves that caused all 22 'hot pink paddlers' to tip into Minnedosa Lake?"

"We learn safety skills and always have a spotter boat with us, but it was no fun being one of the people trapped under Kindred Spirit, that's for sure!" said Sandy Robinson of Brandon.

"Being part of the dragon boat team inspires me to keep fit," said Bev Roman of Erickson. "You need to be fit and flexible in order to do this," agreed Verhelst. "And, I just love being on the water," said Dianne Michaluk, who has been a member for seven years.

In our conversations, some words, as powerful as the 20 person-propelled glide of Spirit of Hope, were voiced repeatedly – comradeship, friendship, sisterhood

and perhaps the most important and most telling – family. Calling each other 'family' is a testament to how close these women have become.

WOH dragon boat team members support each other physically, emotionally and spiritually and are able to discuss topics as intimate as breast reconstruction and the trauma of treatment.

On Aug. 11, the Westman Waves of Hope Dragon Boat Team will travel to Calgary to race, in honour of the 20th anniversary of Calgary's dragon boat team.

Let's wish them 'well,' in every sense of the word.

Annette Beatty issued an open invitation. "If you would like to give dragon boating a try, simply show up at Minnedosa Lake any Wednesday evenings at 6:00 p.m. All ages and fitness abilities accepted. Equipment will be provided."

For more information, visit www.wavesofhope.ca.

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