

## From the desk of Novice Diarist Lynn Sparling

January 12, 2010 "The start of something good"



The thought of dragon boating had crossed my mind years back, long before breast cancer came to call. Funny how some things just find their way back into your life...

And so, in the summer of '09 I decided I would pursue this lost interest. After being approached by an AIAB member at the CIBC Run for the Cure I made the initial contact with a woman named Bunny Rosse. (Her name just makes me smile!) I was directed to attend a Novice meeting at Rae Phillip's home to get all the details and decide if this commitment was for me.

It still amazes me how you can put several women, basically strangers, in a room, and in no time at all have them all cackling and sharing as if they'd known each other for ages. It felt wonderful! In all of my B.C. (Breast Cancer) Journey I had not felt this connected. I was just starting to enjoy this warm, fuzzy feeling when two more Novice stragglers showed up. To my surprise it was a gal, Karen Lutz, who I knew in my business life for probably 20 years. Small world. Karen and her friend Libby Williams joined in and soon we were trying on t-shirts and PFD's. Halfway through the meeting I had no more concerns about the time commitment...I would plan other things around this. The opportunity to spend time with other women like me looking for physical, emotional and spiritual growth was far too enticing. I was in. That night I signed on to be a Deas Diva and smiled all the way home.

March 9, 2010 "Meet the Diva's"

I pulled up in front of Lynn Radbourne's adorable home in New West at 7 pm on the dot. Many had already arrived and once inside introductions began. I'll have to remember this one for other parties, especially ones where you don't know everybody. You know the ones...Tupperware, Candlelite, 5th avenue jewelery...

Spend about 5 minutes speaking to the person beside you learning some interesting things about them, then going round in a circle introduce that person and they you. Great! Boy was I glad we all had those sticky "My name is..." tags!

After the introductions, a few words from each coach, captain and manager, the novices were welcomed lovingly into the fold and the request for volunteer positions began.

Nothing like throwing yourself right in I thought as I raised my hand to not one, but two positions. This was just all feeling too good. After enjoying some great snacks, wine and even a mini photo shoot we were done. Next meeting...In-Water Training at Britannia Pool. Okay, now I know what is expected, what to wear, what type and size of paddle I need...when do we get in the boat? Huh? See you at the pool!

March 13, 2010 "Pool Training or where's the boat?"

Much to our dismay, once in the pool we see, there is no boat. What's with that? Ohhh, this is all about being in the water and what to do when you end up there. Actually, the thought of the boat tipping and all 20 or so ladies being unceremoniously dumped into the icy cold waters of the Deas Slough had never occurred to me. Or, that there would be paddlers that possibly didn't even know how to swim! Mmmm, note to self...read e-mails all the way through to the end.

After breaking into three groups, the non-swimmers, the average and the experienced swimmers we all donned PFD's and jumped in. Let me tell you, it is a weird feeling bobbing around with all your clothes and shoes on! It brought back memories of my younger years and RLSS (Royal Life Saving Society) training. Lucky for me there were quite a few other girls in the experienced group as I wasn't too sure if my memory would be good enough to save someone in distress.

Another event very well planned and executed by the AIAB board members. I can honestly say I have never been involved with a more organized group of people. It made being in a swimming pool, in my clothes, on a Saturday night, with my paddling sisters, pretty darn enjoyable.

Hooyah! Show me the boat!

### **April 3, 2010 "Rain, Wind and ...Whoops!"**

The half anticipated email did come. We would not be on the water this Saturday as winds had been and were still making for less than safe paddling conditions. Alternate plan...those interested come down for circuit training at the marina. Yup, I'm in. So, along with several other brave souls, I stretched, pulled, pushed and ran laps around the marina under the ever consistent tutelage of Patricia.

It was all going great, heart rate was up and on about lap 5 I decided maybe it was time for my inhaler. A quick sprint over to the car & I'll be breathing a bit better...I saw the sprinkler head but definitely misjudged how high it was sticking up and after a brief aerial display landed on my right arm on the cement in the parking lot. Immediately the crew swarmed round, checking my injury and helping me to my feet. I'm okay, I reassure them. I mean, how bad could it be? I fell down, boohoo, keep going.... To make a long story, as they say, shorter, it ended up being an 'undisplaced fracture of the radial head' or I cracked my elbow! Stuck in a sling for three weeks and no paddling for 6 – 8 weeks.

It was a very sad day in Whoville...

### **May 10, 2010 "Picture Perfect"**

I'm not sure how we have managed all this great weather but there definitely have been more beautiful than bad days on the water! Tonight, same as Saturday, Jane has taken Patricia's coaching duties and definitely has not babied us. Having only been back in the boat a couple times since my fall it was quite frustrating trying to get the technique right when that arm just feels...wrong! Got to get that top hand up and over the gunwale,

paddle blade deep in the water, look ahead, breathe, and don't forget...rotate! Gawd!!! I thought I new how to multi task before, but nothing like this. And to top it off, now we are being video taped. Here comes another "race piece". We are getting better at counting, now just to do it all together in time!!

All the while Jane is chanting us through with "Come on!! Come on!! You can do it!! Then...Finish...it...now!!!!"

Another practice race ends, I finally catch my breath and think, Advil and ice pack. So, this is what it means to be a Diva Warrior!

### **June 8, 2010 "Not just another Tuesday Practice"**

Things have been going along really great with my paddling. Almost a month back in the boat and I am definitely starting to find the groove and feel the strength in my shoulders and arms return. Still feeling slightly euphoric from our last regatta I am quickly brought back down to earth with some news. One of our novices, Elena, has just found a lump in her other breast. After 13 years of remission. Now to get a surgeon for the biopsy to diagnose exactly what it is. My mind goes into a freefall to two years ago and hearing the words, "Yes, I'm afraid it is cancer". Then the waiting, the excruciating waiting! For diagnosis, Dr. appointments, tests and more tests, surgery dates... I am disturbed that she will have to endure this all again while feeling, strangely, some small sense of relief for myself having gone through with the bilateral mastectomy.

As much as paddling has been so wonderful for me in many ways, there is still the reality of what makes up this amazing group of survivors. That reality is cancer. I know I will forever be on alert. Yes, this is a very exclusive club, AIAB. One you do, and you don't want to be a member of. With that being said, and now having the qualifications to be part of this organization, it has been a huge blessing and an honor. One I do not carry lightly.

### **July 3, 4, 2010, Whistler Regatta**

With one regatta under my belt and my arm almost one hundred percent I am so ready for this challenge! I must say with every practice I am feeling stronger and more powerful. It is an incredible feeling! I was starting to think my arms would never be firm and fit again from surgery, lymphedema and 6 rounds of chemo, no port. Now I can see there truly is life after breast cancer, and it is real good!

My room mates, Patti, Libby and Karen are all Novices like myself, very keen, and looking forward to our girls weekend. After an enjoyable drive up we check into our accommodations at the Tantalus we find we have been upgraded to a penthouse suite... sweet! The girls start to gather on the decks, which are all connected and happy hour begins...

Now you would think at 53 one would know better...but alas, dawn breaks and I am unfortunately feeling a little under the weather. Who knew happy hour could be so long? A couple Advil, some breakfast and much water I have returned to the land of the living and ready to paddle. We are layered like crazy as the temperature is about 3 degrees. And this is supposed to be July? Visions of last year's Whistler hot and sunny regatta soon vanish

as we make our way to the Diva tent in the Athlete's Village. Within minutes we are called to make our way to the marshalling and warm-up area. The first races of the day are about to begin.

As this is also the Nationals we have a wonderful opportunity to watch some incredible dragon boaters in between our heats. Saturday is set up as dash races, 200 meters, which I have not done before. I am feeling our chances are pretty good to do well as we have been training hard with that darn drag at the end of the boat! Many of our race pieces are 2 – 3 minutes so stamina is coming along.

And so we raced...and each time improved! Wow!!! The 200m is short, give it everything for the full pull! Exhilarating! We really showed our Diva determination right into day two and the 500m races. We pulled off a Silver medal in the Women's "B" division as well as came in 4th out of 7 in the Breast Cancer Challenge, closely behind 2 national teams and the North Shore Dragon Busters. How pleased were we??? Extremely! Although missing in body Lucille, Lois and Jo were with us in spirit for every race.

Finally, at the end of the day the sun came out, we donned our medals and with beer in hand, raised our glasses to the toast of "Reach!" Now that is satisfying!

In the words of Arnold Schwarzenegger..."I'll be bawck!"

### **My Final Reflections, Novice Paddling Season 2010.**

All my paddling gear is finally washed and packed up. My pink PFD hangs in the boot room and paddle has found its spot in my workout room. It's comforting to see it everyday to remind me what an impact paddling and the AIAB has had on me.

It has been over a year ago since I lost both breasts, my hair, and sadly, a five year relationship. My confidence and general sense of self, of simply being a woman, was shaken. There was an emptiness in me, a great need for not only physical but emotional and spiritual healing. And, as much as my close network of family and friends were there for me, I knew I needed a different kind of connection. A connection that truly could relate to my journey. Enter the AIAB...

At the risk of sounding corny, joining Abreast In A Boat was the exact connection I was seeking and in essence brought me back to life. When I reflect on the many wonderful women I have met, their warmth, compassion, strength I feel so blessed. The incredible coaches and mentors, experienced and fellow novice paddlers all have played a part in my healing. I will always remember this year as the year I found myself again. I looked forward to every practice, regatta, fling or awareness function. This amazing group of warrior women and a boat had "filled me up".

There is no doubt in my mind that jumping aboard Hope Floats was one of my smartest decisions to date. I can hardly wait for the 2011 season to begin and hear that call again... Paddles up!

Thanks to all my paddling sisters for a phenomenal season!