

## 'Before, I was just going through life. Now, I am actually living it'



Abreast in a Boat society board members Diane Wahl and Linda Hopwo stand with the organization's president Leslie Lewis. The trio are hoping to increase their dragon boat team's membership in the Tri-Cities after the club moved to Port Moody's Rocky Point Park this month. An orientation meeting will be held in the new year but new members are always welcome.

*GARY MCKENNA/THE TRI-CITY NEWS*

By [Gary McKenna - The Tri-City News](#)

Published: **December 23, 2011 2:00 AM**

When Linda Hopwo joined the [Abreast in a Boat](#) dragon boat team last year, she was hoping to meet some fellow breast cancer survivors and get a bit of exercise.

But she also found a floating support group.

Since her first time on the water with the team, she said she has felt more empowered and has discovered confidence she didn't know she had.

"I am in the best shape I have been in years," said Hopwo, a director and vice-chair of communications for the Abreast in a Boat society. "I have probably gone outside my comfort zone I don't know how many times.

"Before, I was just going through life. Now, I am actually living it."

Abreast in a Boat is made up of women who have survived breast cancer and want to raise awareness about the disease while having fun.

Adorned in bright pink shirts and lifejackets, the team paddles on Burrard Inlet three times a week, training to compete for various events. Some of the members have even gone on to paddle in international events in Malaysia, South Africa, Singapore and Las Vegas.

The group started in 1996 with an initial team of 25 women and has expanded to other communities in the Lower Mainland, including Langley, Richmond and Vancouver. It has even inspired groups overseas and today there are more than 150 teams around the world.

Hopwo is part of a club that has operated at Burnaby's Barnet Marine park for years but the group decided to move to Port Moody's Rocky Point park for the upcoming season.

Now that the team has found a new home, Leslie Lewis, the society's president, is hoping to attract new members. Women who join run in age from their early 30s to 85, and have a variety of fitness levels are welcome.

Aside from the fun and exercise, Lewis has also benefited from being around people who have survived the disease.

"It was really nice having women who have been down a similar road that I could talk to and lean on," she said. "It was very helpful."

Before the group formed in 1996, there was a belief among some health professionals and breast cancer survivors that women recovering from the disease should avoid upper-body exercise. It was thought that lymphedema could occur, causing a painful swelling of the arm and chest area that is sometimes the result of surgery.

Today, studies have proven that survivors can exercise without increasing their risk of lymphedema and those with active lifestyles can reduce the risk of cancer recurrence.

"Studies have now shown that the survival rate is greater for woman that do lead active lifestyles," said Diane Wahl, a member of the Rocky Point club. "There is life after a breast cancer diagnosis — a fun, happy, active life."

**• Abreast in a Boat's next orientation meeting is Jan. 12 and new members are always welcome. For more information about the society or to join the group, email**

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