

Beating cancer with a paddle



North Van Abreast in a Boat members (left to right) Françoise Doe, Esther Matsubuchi and Rosemary Shandler recently earned a silver and two bronze medals at a dragon boat regatta in Southeast Asia.

Submitted photo

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Paddling through the waters of False Creek in a long canoe adorned with a dragon head, Esther Matsubuchi remained brave.

But in the back of her mind, lymphedema was lurking. Matsubuchi, a breast cancer survivor, was told by her doctor that she could potentially develop this debilitating condition that causes permanent swelling of the arms.

Don't knit. Don't garden. Don't play the piano. Basically, don't move your upper body too much she was told. But the Lynn Valley resident didn't heed that advice.

Instead, she paddled through the oft-choppy waters of False Creek under the careful watch of Dr. Don McKenzie, a University of British Columbia sports-medicine expert.

The contrarian doctor believed there was no strong correlation between lymphedema and upper body movements in breast cancer patients. In 1996 he tested that theory by rounding up two dozen breast cancer survivors between the ages of 30 and 60, including Matsubuchi, and placing them two across in a close-quarters dragon boat that doubled as a lab. They called themselves Abreast in a Boat.

They started cautiously.

“We paddled a total of four minutes in one hour,” said Matsubuchi.

It was wet and cold outside during practices in early April. But the conditions didn’t dampen spirits inside the boat — nor did the blisters, bruises and aches and a few misfiring paddles that accidentally struck other occupants.

The ladies celebrated the end of three months of lymphedema testing by entering the Vancouver Dragon Boat Festival. Up against younger and stronger mixed-gender teams, the result Abreast in a Boat recorded was best filed under personal accomplishment. And Dr. McKenzie’s theory prevailed: not a single woman on the team developed lymphedema.

His findings prompted some breast cancer oncologists to change the way they counsel patients about lymphedema.

The same year [Abreast in a Boat](#) was formed, Francoise Doe found a lump in her breast during a self exam. She was working as a special education aid in the North Vancouver School District at the time. Her first chemotherapy session fell on her daughter’s 16th birthday.

“It was low-key event,” recalled Doe.

During her recovery period in 1997, she learned of Abreast in Boat through a breast cancer support group. A self-described “non-amphibious person,” Doe needed a change of scenery.

“I just wanted to put cancer aside,” she said. “I needed a break from that.”

In the midst of recuperating from her battle with breast cancer, Doe was also going through a separation and in search of support. She found solace with the paddle-boating cancer survivors from False Creek.

Just as Doe was stepping into a dragon boat, another North Vancouver resident, Rosemary Shandler,

was reeling from her own breast cancer diagnosis.

She cheered weakly from the sidelines as a sea of pink-clad ladies furiously paddled their dragon boat through False Creek to the rhythm of the drum beat.

“I cried like a baby,” she said. “It was just so inspiring to me. They had gotten back in touch with their bodies, their health and their strength.”

Shandler vowed to seek them out — when she was well enough. In 2000, now fragile only from emotional scars she made good on her promise to join Abreast in a Boat False Creek, which by this time had teams throughout the Lower Mainland.

Shandler had plenty to offer, bringing marathon running endurance to the team. But that doesn't mean she wasn't happily exhausted after her first time out on the water.

“I found that during the first season I would be sitting out at the end of the [dragon] boat and I had a feeling of such joy,” said Shandler, who paddles with Abreast in Barnet in the Burrard Inlet.

The Barnet Marine Park setting is quite tranquil. Eagles, herons and harbour seals share the water with these teak-hulled canoes — rigged with decorative Chinese dragon heads and tails — that majestically glide across the waters of the Burrard Inlet.

Abreast in a Boat is a support group of sorts, but participants try to not talk about the ‘c-word’.

“We don't have a chance,” said Matsubuchi. “We are not allowed to talk in the boat.”

Still, there's no elephant onboard. Personal stories are shared. It took Matsubuchi a bit longer to open up about her cancer.

“People don't talk about [cancer], in places like Japan and China,” said Matsubuchi, who is of Japanese heritage.

“My parents used to go to funerals and come home not knowing how the person died. They presumed it was cancer because the person had looked pale lately.”

Quashing that cancer stigma is a mission undertaken by the women of Abreast in a Boat. They courageously tell their tales all over the world, from the Pacific Northwest to the Eastern United States, Europe and Asia.

This past October, all three North Vancouver women took part in an international dragon boating regatta for female cancer survivors, in Putrajaya, Malaysia. The hybrid team — comprised of members from the six Lower Mainland Abreast in a Boat groups — earned a silver and two bronze medals.

Another North Vancouver woman was on the wait list for this trip, an 86-year-old who had paddled alongside Matsubuchi for many years. They were carpooling companions. But in October, her friend's health took a turn for the worse.

“At the funeral today everyone said we were twins,” said Matsubuchi.

Shandler said Malaysia was never on her bucket list. However, when the opportunity to paddle in the tropical waters of Southeast Asia came up, she jumped.

Doe enjoyed the people and weather in Malaysia. She also learned that talking about cancer in that region of the world is considered taboo.

“That’s why we travel — to show other women there is life after breast cancer,” said Doe.

The North Shore Dragon Busters — a local Abreast in a Boat affiliate — have been paddling out of Deep Cove for the past decade. If you are a breast cancer survivor and interested in joining them, email info@dragonbusters.ca.

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