

Diary of a Novice Paddler 2007 – Journal by Carol Thorbes who is a paddler on the 2007 Novice Crew

Journal Entry #1 February 28, 2007

Testing the Waters



True to our novice nature, 18 of us 25 newbies made our way gingerly and eagerly to Abreast In A Boat (AIAB) alumna Brenda Hochachka's house to test paddling waters. We were eager to find out about this new exercise cult, which would demand passionate commitment and test our stamina as breast cancer survivors. Our trip to Brenda's abode was made gingerly because it was a dark and stormy night, and her home sits on some far-flung corner of the UBC endowment lands.

Once there, we knew we were in for a good time as bright pink AIAB shirts steered us into her driveway. The door to Brenda's spacious home popped open to a welcoming fire blazing in one corner and women

lounging and erupting in gales of laughter in others. In between slurps of beverages and bites of various treats filling Brenda's generous smorgasbord, each novice bared her soul about her battle with breast cancer. The bond between us was already building and we could sense our excitement about dragon boat racing rising.

Any lingering fears about not being up to snuff were easily snuffed out by warm encouragement from our mentors. They were our hostess Brenda, our novice boat steers Judi Letawsky and Susan Doyle, our coaches Carol Dale and Jane Frost, AIAB board membership chair Shirley Halliday, Dr. Don McKenzie, AIAB founder and fearless leader and his assistant Diana Jespersen. Several mentors are AIAB originals; they've lived to tell tales about memorable mishaps and how dragon boat mania can spawn an everlasting sisterhood among breast cancer survivors.

We did get down to serious business at our first planning meeting. We chose Staying Abreast as our team name, took on committee responsibilities and Don gave us the low down on the importance of shaping up slowly if we wanted to ship out successfully. Carol kept us in stitches with her dry sense of humour, and she and Jane kept us in suspense with their constant bickering about administrative issues. At one point Carol looked at us with a dead pan expression and said, "Don't worry, this is the way we get things done, isn't it Jane?" Jane smiled and nodded agreeably.

Before the evening had ended and we had poured ourselves back into the dark and stormy night, Susan relieved many novices of a pocketful of cash. All the pink paraphernalia and clothing that goes into the making of a real AIAB dragon boat racer were just too much for most of us to resist. And all the money was going to a good cause, keeping the now 12-year-old AIAB tradition afloat.

We all left with good food and drink in our belly, warm memories of a fun first meeting and thinking, Okay now, lets get out there. Paddles up!!



Journal Entry #2. April 4, 2007
The moment of truth



That first practice was our moment of truth. No doubt we were all thinking, Oh boy, Carol and Don will see that I haven't been to the gym as often as I should have been. You could cut the silence with a knife as we gathered under threatening, grey skies outside of the False Creek Recreation Centre. Was rain going to add insult to the humiliation of falling behind other novice paddlers who had been madly peddling their arms and legs on some lifecycle in preparation for this night?

Novice member Barbra Baker's bouncy but gentle warm-up to music helped lighten our mood before we climbed into our dragon boat, wearing floatation devices and armed with our paddles. Like kindergarten kids, we had been paired off into twosomes. We paddled out successfully into the middle of False Creek. Once there, our fearless leader Don and his assistant Diana patiently schooled us in the proper way to hold, insert

and move our paddles through the water. Like Barbie dolls, we learned to rotate our torsos towards the water and then back, moving our paddles simultaneously in one short graceful stroke. At least that was the theory.

Mother Nature was kind and didn't rain on us; Don was compassionate and focused on getting us to practice good technique rather than putting our stamina to the test. Diana was unflagging in her efforts to help each one of us refine our technique. She was amazingly deft at keeping herself erect while standing behind each paddler and helping her to rotate her torso while getting her paddle up and ready to cut neatly through water. Within an hour and a half we were paddling in rhythm to the sound of Dons voice calling out our strokes, "One, two, three, four, let it run." By the time we were ready to head for shore, put down our paddles and raise our glasses in a toast to our christening as dragon boaters, we were feeling quite pleased with ourselves. Nobody had to be lifted out of the boat because of exhaustion and nobody had turned her paddle into a weapon of mass destruction. Despite being tightly packed in our dragon boat, our twelve twosomes paddled in relative harmony and stayed abreast of Dons instruction.

Giddy with the success of our first paddling effort and strengthened camaraderie, we headed home delighted to be all in the same boat.



Journal entry #3. April 11, 2007

Paddling to the beat of our own cerebral drums

A bevy of pink shirted beauties, we took over the lawn adjoining the False Creek Recreation Centre and began to gyrate to Barbs warm-up music at 5:15 p.m. promptly. We then took our designated positions in our dragon boat, many of us becoming lefties instead of righties or the opposite of whatever we were the last time. Alternating positions would give us a chance to adapt to paddling on both sides of the boat. And adaptation was the theme of this Wednesday's practice.

First off an intensely focused Jane Frost announced that Don was in Switzerland. Jane would be beating the drum and calling out the strokes that would keep us paddling in harmony instead of disintegrating into dragon boat chaos. Despite Jane's best efforts, her faltering voice and sometimes erratically beaten drum inspired us to paddle unwontedly to the beat of our own cerebral drum. Jane's earnest efforts to build stamina and sustainable rhythmic paddling amongst us through odd and even, back and front and pause drills had some of us contemplating mutiny on the dragon boat. But Carol got us back in the mood to move to the beat of our fearless leader's challenging drum with her humorous side comments. "I don't know about this odd and even bit; seems a bit uneven to me", reflected Carol openly. Before the evening was out we were thanking Jane for pushing us to work together, building our stamina and teaching us to paddle reliably to a variety of counted stroke formulas. However, this time, weary from rising above the previous week's achievements, most of us headed home rather than for a restaurant to toast surviving our second night as novice paddlers.

Only Susan, Jane, Carol, Jenny Silver (my assigned paddling mentor) and I trooped off to a Granville Island pub. There, Carol demonstrated that her dexterity with maneuvering liquids applied not only to paddling water but also drinking different beverages. Holding a martini in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other, Carol showed us that a two-fisted paddler can be as graceful with a drink in each hand as she is with a paddle in one. Exercising elegant restraint and rhythm, alternately, Carol juggled back first one glass and the other and so on.

Journal entry #4. April 14, 2007

The taste of competition

This was to be our first Saturday morning practice and if the truth be known many of us had covered in our warm beds the night before. The incessant rain assaulting our roofs at 4 a.m. had us fearing that Mother Nature would be drenching us during our two-hour dragon boat practice. But once again she had decided to delay testing our true metal. We awoke to a sunny crisp day. Only our inability to get the hang of Barb's lateral Charleston during our usual warm-up exercises had us worrying a little about the day's harmony. But we laughed it off and trooped into our boat in obedient twosomes.

Don was back, and we synced easily with his strong but patient stroke-calling and the deliberate beat of his paddle against our dragon boat's bottom. Impressed with how Jane's tough love training had strengthened our ability to follow orders, Don wasted no time taking us to the next step. Time to get into some serious stamina building. We alternated between gentle, rhythmic paddling and hard fast strokes, which enabled our lengthy dragon boat to slice through five kilometers of water in no time at all. Amazed at our accomplishment, we gazed up at Science World in disbelief, and then reality hit. "Oh my God, we've got to paddle back", was the phrase that could be read in many a novice paddlers' now wide-open eyes. Though we were starting to experience the bodily ache of having a contagious enthusiasm that outstrips physical conditioning, we happily followed Don's driving beat back. Just before heading for shore, we had witnessed our first close-up of a dragon boat race, this one only 250 metres. But it was enough to whet our appetite for competition. Our first women's race and the Alcan festival are around the corner. On the way back we chanted and beat out paddles on our dragon boat's floor. We savoured

our first taste of euphoria from bonding with a sport that, as Don says, gets us closer to nature than any other.

We also gained a new appreciation of the universal usefulness of high energy camaraderie in paddling. It enables us to get where and what we want fast, for example, a fine male kayaker, with some assistance from Don's daughter Kari, was there for the overtaking at one point. A doting father with his daughter's best interest at heart, Don, upon seeing her kayaking with some handsome stranger, questioned "Who is this guy paddling with my daughter?" Momentarily abusing his powers, Don had us paddling over to the attractive twosome for a closer look. Assured that all was right and Kari was still Daddy's girl, Don directed us to leave the two to their day's adventure.

We later caught up with Kari paddling solo. She informed us that her companion had paddled off hastily after falling into the drink. Poor man was probably humiliated. Kari announced, He was too old for me, anyway. Daddy smiled agreeably. Having inherited her Dad's gracious and generous spirit as well as his bright, wide, infectious smile, Kari offered, "One of you girls might like him." For a moment, we seriously contemplated the offer, especially now that we were drunk with the pride of becoming strong stroking novice paddlers. But then we thought better of it – no point in abusing our powers this early in the game. We'll save our energy for competition.

Journal Entry #5 Wednesday, April 18, 2007

Don't Miss the Boat



Nobody is fessing up. But it's obvious that many of us are doing a sun dance before we bed down for the night, especially the night before our dragon boat practice. For the fifth practice in a row we have been spared a drop of rain, despite the fact climate change seems to be making Lotus Land a lot wetter than it is historically known to be. Even Don, our fearless leader, asked in bewilderment tonight, "Have you guys had any rain yet?"

As our dragon boat slipped away from the dock at False Creek, we could hear the panicky screams of a fellow dragon boater in the distance – from ashore rather than within our ranks. We looked up to see Yvonne running madly down the walkway leading to our now adrift dragon boat. We waited with baited breath to see whether Don would show mercy and go back for her or tell us to keep paddling away. Don was merciful and we headed back to get Yvonne who shouted "Thank you, thank you," repeatedly as she pounded down the dock and leaped into our boat. Confusion over our start time, which had been

moved up to enable an early finish so that we could attend a late night lecture by oncologist Karen Gelmon, had made Yvonne late. Once in the boat and a few metres from shore, Don announced that Yvonne would have to single handedly paddle us out to our first practice point. Fortunately, he was just kidding and after a few chuckles we resumed our collective paddle into deeper waters.

True to our team name we had to stay abreast of Don's instructions tonight. Intent on focusing our practice on perfecting our paddling technique, Don used a variety of routines aimed to get us to lean out of the boat, pivot on our butts and angle the tops of our paddles out of the boat. Digging into the water and developing unified power strokes were also the name of the game tonight. "Alright I don't want you looking like a bunch of water lilies," exclaimed Don at one point. After a tough and challenging hour of rowing hard and using a number of paddling configurations we headed back for shore, feeling exhausted but enthused about the night's accomplishments.

Yvonne frequently set the pace and performance for us, so much so that Don's parting comment at the end of the evening was, "Glad we came back to get you."

Journal entry #6 Saturday, April 21, 2007

Jane the Terrorizer...not so terrible

Another blessed Saturday for our two-hour dragon boat practice: Mother Nature's sunny smile is once again shining down upon us. Those of us who arrive on the dot at 9:15 a.m. gather around novice member Wenda Daykin. She's anxious to show Don, our fearless leader, a picture of her daughter with Don's daughter Kari from 10 years ago. It turns out the two were dragon boat competitors back then and Wendy's daughter was victorious over Kari, who, in a reversal of fortune, is now an Olympic hopeful. Amazing how people and events revisit us in different manifestations in our lives.



This Saturday practice our fearless leader Don is once again on the road, meaning that Jane, our pull no punches coach, is once again at the helm. Carol, our other alumnae

coach reads out the paddling orders from Don. “Don’t terrorize the team,” says Carol looking sternly up from her sheet of instructions at Jane, who rolls her eyes in controlled bemusement.

We file into our dragon boat. This one is faster and shallower than what we’ve gotten used to. Bonnie no sooner steps into the boat, than she loses her step and almost lands us all into the drink. A quick recovery stabilizes the boat, and after a collective sigh of relief we paddle out to practice with Jane the Terrorizer.

However, Jane doesn’t live up to her dubious reputation this Saturday. Subdued by Don’s terse instructions and Carol’s watchful eye, she deftly guides us through a morning work out that demonstrates our timing, if not our technique, is improving greatly. Jane takes us through a series of exercises aimed at improving our technique and stamina.

Jane’s excellent instruction quells any desire for mutiny on the dragon boat this time, but a couple of times novice dragon boaters exemplify just how comfortable everyone is becoming with each other. Anita, a little frustrated that Jane keeps telling her that her paddle is too high, ponders the normality of her anatomy. “Maybe my arms are too long and that’s why my paddle keeps going above my forehead,” suggests Anita. Wendy stridently suggests that union rules should be observed to ensure that our breaks are sufficient between power stroke practices.

On our way back to shore after a good morning practice, we observe some other dragon boaters out for their drill. Having had the importance of swiveling our backs as we stroke driven into us, we’re quick to note the lack of proper rotation in other paddlers. Yes, we have come a long way in just six practices. We’re now critiquing potential competitors during our practices.

Another sure sign that our team is beginning to bond is our level of trust when we do our backstretches. In the beginning none of us dare lean all the way back onto our fellow paddlers knees for fear they wouldn’t be there. Now, we’re leaning all the way back with confidence and resting on each others knees. It’s a sure sign that trust is building between us paddlers.

Journal entry #7 April 25, 2007
It's raining, it's pouring.....



It's raining, it's pouring but the paddlers keep paddling.....As I couldn't make it to practice that rainy evening, Yvonne kindly agreed to be my eyes on the night's events. Here is Yvonne's account of the night's events:

It was our first rainy night out, and a lot of dedicated paddlers turned up. We huddled under the community centre canopy and Dianne gave us a pep talk, congratulating us on sticking it out. She promised us "bums on the boat" gifts at Sammy J. Pepper's after the practice. Coach Carol couldn't make it this evening. Barb carried off the warm up like a pro, despite the rain and then we made a dash for the boat.

Don exemplified a coach who is there rain or shine – wheezing and coughing from a cold, he assumed the helm of our dragon boat. Jane was at the front of the boat barking out commands. She definitely keeps us on our

toes. Her water logged drum produced a soft thud to keep our strokes in time; the drum was accompanied by her hoarse voice yelling "dig, dig."

We learned a new technique this evening – starting with the paddle ready in the water and then a quick thrust back followed by six strong deep paddles, 10 fluff paddles and then 10 fast forward strokes. It was exciting – gave us a taste of being at the race. Due to the inclement weather our practice was shorter than usual. We headed back for shore at 7:05 p.m. Luckily, another group wanted to take our boat out, since no one was volunteering to paddle it back to its dock. We were soaked but not freezing as all the paddling had kept the blood flowing.

Don was too sick to brave water on land in the form of drinks. Nevertheless 15 soaked paddlers braved more water in the form of pints and glasses of their favourite liquored beverage. Dianne handed out small "pink" presents to acknowledge our bravery. It was a nice cozy get together.

Jane brought up the regatta in Vernon in July as something that is promoted to the novice team. It gives everyone an opportunity to get the heck out of Dodge, party and have a chance to paddle in unison one more time at least after the Alcan festival.

Journal entry #8 May 1st, 2007
Paddling in a Gemini



It had to happen sooner or later, only Don and Carol thought it would be later in our training season. We discovered on Saturday, April 28 that we would be paddling in a Gemini, a much sleeker and shallower boat than we were used to.

Like the astrological sign Gemini, this dragon boat's performance was unpredictable. If the paddlers were in sync it performed beautifully, slicing through the water like a knife through butter. If the left paddler didn't know what the right paddler was doing we were in trouble. The Gemini could dump us like a bronco tossing its rider.

Don and Carol seemed visibly concerned. They had arched eyebrows. But our earlier warm up session with Barb — we did a Zorba The Greek grapevine in perfect sync and with no visible injuries — showed we were ready for this two faced dragon boat. Our bonding was so complete that our coach Carol and novice Dianne reacted in unison to Barb's use of the song "Hit the Road Jack" in her warm up session. As the song was winding down Dianne exclaimed: "Hey that was my theme song when I kicked out my ex-husband Jack." Carol then chimed in, "Hey, my ex-husband's name was Jack too, but I didn't get a chance to kick him out." Some may say too much information, but this is true bonding.

On to the practice, which unfolded under a crystal blue sky with warm sun beating down on the paddlers. Our bonding on land rapidly disintegrated. Don said he wanted to build our paddling fitness in this session, and he definitely had his work cut out for him. We'd start out in sync but after several repetitions of 10 fluff and 10 hard strokes we began paddling like a drunken centipede.

Towards the end of our training session though we started to fall into sync, even under duress. Inspired by Carol's bravery in executing stretches while standing in a Gemini and Don's endless patience, as he kayaked along side our dragon boat, we executed a series of fluff and hard strokes in sync. But, once back on land, we scattered quickly for fear Granville Island's parking commissionaires would ruin our sense of harmony.

Journal entry #9 May 2nd, 2007

A Magical Practice



Our practice Wednesday, May 2 reminded me of those rare days in life when you wake up expecting every thing to go wrong. But, instead, the day unfolds into a mystical day filled with unmatched bliss and discovery.

All day it had rained with the ferocity of a winter downpour. In fact, up at Simon Fraser University — a place acclaimed for having its own climate — where I work, I stared in horror as thick raindrops pounded my office window. I rubbed my eyes. It looked an awful lot like sleet.

But by the time our team had gathered near the False Creek Recreation Centre, the rain had vanished and the area was bathed in benevolent sunshine. It seemed eerily fitting that Dianne, our captain, had chosen this night to tell us about a legendary Chinese practice to appease the water folks' water deity, the Dragon. We learned that it was customary for the Chinese to offer human sacrifices to the Dragon. We nodded in nervous agreement as Dianne suggested we do something more civilized to appease our version of Dragon gods — our coaches.

Judi, Susan and Carol were called forth to accept talismans in little plastic bags. Dianne told Don he would be appeased at a later day with a special gift. Oh, oh, maybe our modern day version of this fertility ritual would still involve the sacrifice of a novice paddler. Everyone vowed to pull their weight on the water from here on in, especially after Carol's remark when she accepted her gift: "Is this edible?"

Perhaps it was the fear of being roasted alive at some novice barbecue; perhaps it was the headiness of watching Mother Nature transform a dark day into a delightful evening. Or maybe, it was just that our time together had gelled. From the moment we paddled out from the dock that night, every stroke of our paddles was filled with confidence, power and harmony.

We moved speedily and easily out to Science World where Don took us through exercises designed to build our speed and challenge our synchronicity. At one point, after Don yelled, “Let it run,” we looked down in silence at the water, our eyes wide with amazement. The dragon boat was speeding so fast it was keeping pace with small-motorized boats. It was in that moment that we knew our minds, bodies and paddles were capable of being one, and our coaching deities — Don, Carol, Judi and Susan — would get us there.

After the practice, back at Sammy J Peppers, the evening’s magic continued to unfold. We got our new Scotiabank team shirts. Like teenage girls primping before a mirror, we giddily pulled on our new fuchsia pink shirts and showed them off to each other. We then became engrossed in raising a glass of wine, beer or some other intoxicating liquid to toast the night’s success and dug into our dinners.

The conversation at our table was as delicious and complex as the flavours of the great food at Sammy’s. We found out that Don (2004) and Jane (2005) are former winners of the BC Community Achievement Award. We also learned that Carol and Jenny Yule had gone to Victoria the previous week to see someone, whom they had nominated for the 2006 award, receive it.

Like the paddle strokes that reach forward and deep into the water to power our dragon boat and carry us into new waters, our conversation ran deep that night, taking us to a new level of bonding. We talked about our breast cancers: how wonderful it was to be with women who could talk easily about this devastating disease. We reflected on the therapy in sharing fears, sharing secrets, sharing tension-releasing jokes.

Yes, it was a magical practice — a night of advancing our mastery of our dragon boat, of building bonds with our god-like coaches and of appeasing the demons within ourselves.

Journal entry #10 May 5th, 2007

One in Mind and Many in Bodies



The wind buffeted our boat as we dozen or so dragon slayers paddled out into False Creek for our practice in rippled waters. Mindful of our rapidly approaching first dragon boat race in a few weeks, we could hear Katie’s last words echoing in our minds: “Be one in mind and many in body.” Katie, our loveable novice mascot who

hails from England and continues dancing, like an Ever Ready bunny, to our warm up music, once it has shut off, was acting captain. Dianne was away.

Don, our illustrious leader, was at the helm with a badly beat up paddle in hand to hammer out our paddling rhythm. The brisk wind made him wish once again that he had donned his splash skirt, or even better a pair of pants. Wishful thinking had led him to believe that he could paddle in his canoe beside our boat if Jane, our drummer, was here. But such was not the case. So we took delight in teasing Don about the goose bumps ruining the muscular definition of his well toned and bronzed legs.

Once again Wenda and Anita set the pace with the hypnotic, swan-like dives of their paddles into the water. Today, was VPD — no the Vancouver Police were not accompanying us, though some of us with a passion for men in uniform (better not wear that splash skirt, Don), might have liked that.

Today, was Vertical Paddle Day — a day of drills in keeping the paddle perpendicular to the outside of the boat, which required rotating the arm like a spoke on a bicycle wheel to get the paddle back to starting position. As we're still waiting for the genetic discovery that will make this execution a reality, we strived just to approximate it. Our paddles were allowed to move out from the boat in a 45 degree angle as they swished back into the start position. This was called a "J" stroke.

Like our practice the previous Wednesday, this Saturday's was magical. Aside from Don reminding us that it was VPD every 20 minutes, we literally sailed around False Creek at a rapid clip, powered by our synchronized paddles. A moment of truth — a reality check — came only after our lead paddlers Wenda and Anita started smelling blood. They heard Don say: "Maybe we should find a boat to start against."

Wenda and Anita, their eyes slightly glazed with a desire to put our paddling prowess to the test, said, "Yes, yes!! How about that boat over there!" The targeted team agreed and we got into the start position, confident that we novices would show the more experienced paddlers what female power is all about.

No sooner was the start called than, like in a bad movie, we saw the bad guys getting away. If it's possible for paddlers to create a wake, the bad guys left us in theirs, holding our paddles between our legs. "Never mind," laughed Don, "You have had a taste of true competition and I can really see your strength. It's just that you were all paddling in different directions." Some how the smell of blood had led us to forget Katie's wise words: "Stay one in mind and many in body." We vowed not to let the excitement of competition dissolve our unity next time.

Journal entry #11 May 9th, 2007

Paddling to our paddling song

Nobody said anything about multi-tasking being a definite asset when we signed up for dragon boating. But such a skill would be a great asset if we are to paddle, follow oral instructions and sing our dragon boat song successfully to the beat of a waltz. Tonight, Dianne showed us how it is done on land. No fair she didn't have to paddle. She corralled Judi, the two Jennies (senior paddlers) and Don into singing our paddling song minus the

paddling. “Beautiful paddling weather. We’re out on the water again. We paddle ourselves to exhaustion.”

A perplexed Jackie questioned with a grimace, “Do we have to paddle while we’re singing to the beat of a waltz?” The answer came back, “Mais oui” But we had greater challenges ahead that evening. Don let it be known: “You’re in for it tonight.”

Jane was at the bow of our dragon boat, driving her paddle up and down into the boat’s bottom, like a human pile driver. We were heading out for a night of relentless drills dedicated to building our stamina. That meant rowing hard and continuously for two minutes, which could seem an eternity for those of us neglecting our gym training in between paddling sessions.

If it hadn’t been for a couple of our mentors being in the boat this evening, we might have cracked under Jane’s paddling whip. But we all wanted to shine for our mentors and so we kept a stiff upper lip and put on a good performance. Don, Carol, Jane, Susan (our steerer) and our mentors were duly impressed.

Pleased with ourselves we paddled back to shore and into the setting sun singing our dragon boat song. Every stroke and every note were in unison. Amazing what you can do when you don’t think too hard on it. With our dark blue life jackets silhouetted by the setting sun, we looked and felt like girl guides heading home from a good night’s exercise and bonding.

Journal entry #12 May 12th, 2007

The little girl in the paddlers

The bond among us is getting so strong that it’s increasingly difficult for Carol, Don and Jane to stop the shenanigans that we get up to during our warm-up. Katie, whom I affectionately call our mascot, got so into Barb’s provocative tunes that – with encouragement from us – she started gyrating towards the no parking pole in the centre of our warm up area. Only Carol’s call to take our places in the dragon boat lineup kept Katie from taking our warm up sessions to a new level.

Katie was also the star of our Abreast In A Boat photos, which Judi showed us just before our warm up. Sprawled out in all her fuchsia t-shirt glory, Katie lay on the ground with her head in her hand and a serene smile on her face. She was a fitting front row paddler in our novice class photo.

The frolicking continued as we paddled out to Science World for our Saturday session in abundant sunshine. We would-be five year olds suddenly got serious though when the opportunity arose for us to line up near competitors in a real race. We assumed the start position and practiced following instructions to get into proper alignment with the competitors. Jane, whose real talent for getting us to focus was becoming more apparent, yelled out instructions: “Pull, pull, last three paddlers paddle back.”

Once in place we waited for the start gun. My hands clenched around my paddle in the hold position. My gaze remained glued to Jane’s face. Her voice would signal when to plunge our paddles into the water, pulling our dragon boat forward and into the race.

Jane's eyes transfixed me. They were round like saucers and brimming with excitement. Her whole body and smile radiated the joy of anticipating the race's start.

In those moments, I saw the face of not a grown woman but a young girl who could barely contain her readiness. Each time, her eyes rested on one of us, her face would relax a bit, a mischievous giggle escaping from her lips. I'm not sure what was more fun – watching Jane ready us for the race or plunging paddles into the water with all our strength to get our dragon boat up to speed.

On the way back after a good two hour practice we allowed ourselves to fantasize about training for the Olympics – never mind that we still had to get through our first regatta, only weeks away. But Don quickly popped our bubble. "Sorry girls, we won't be going to the Olympics. Most of you are on Tamoxifen and, like steroids, that's a banned substance." Oh well, one can dream.

Journal entry #13 May 16th, 2007

Goslings and mother hens' party

Grown men get to have a second childhood and so do breast cancer survivors. That is if they belong to the world famous Abreast In A Boat. The mere act of joining the group enables a breast cancer survivor to be reborn as a gosling. Our esteemed coaches revealed our rebirth tonight, just before our ritual paddle practice in False Creek. Our AIAB mentors/mother hens nurture the goslings/novices into full paddling maidenhood.

Our coming-out race – the May 26 women's regatta – was rapidly approaching. Don, our esteemed father (not sure which of the mother hens is our real mother or maybe Don runs a harem), informed us we had a heavy decision to make. We had to choose a race strategy.

Our captain Dianne, who must have been an angel in a previous life, said in her soft caring voice, "I don't know how the rest of you feel but I think we should be in this for fun and to bond, not primarily for competition." Several other goslings seconded her feelings and so we headed out to paddle practice with a new motto in our hearts. "One in heart and many in body." One of the goslings giggled, "Well we'll never be one in mind," alluding to our free-for-all paddling stroke technique under extreme pressure. Bad gosling.

Don, Jane, Carol, Susan and Judi took us through our usual drills under another evening canopy of sunshine. A few new routines were thrown in to further build our stamina. They included a nonstop leisurely tour of False Creek by none other than we paddlers and a two minute all out paddle alternating between deep strong and deep light paddle strokes.

Judi's quiet disposition and flawless steering kept us on the straight and narrow around looming boats, even when we failed to respond to Jane's frantic "hold, hold the boat" please. That seemed to be the time when some of us were preoccupied with holding something other than our paddle in place -a cookie in our mouth or a hand over our mouth to stifle a laugh. Hey, we're only goslings after all!

The smell of boaters barbecuing, others enjoying a joint and the Tarzan-like torsos of solo male paddlers passing by wreaked havoc with our focus. At one point, our boat's back

paddlers – often the most naughty goslings – mischievously dangled a bag of chocolate cookies before the perspiring faces of passing paddlers. They groaned and looked as though they were going to lunge for the cookies but thought better of it.

On our way back from practice, a plethora of fuchsia pink-boa-draped AIAB mother hens lined Alder Bay. It was an amazingly beautiful sight, all that pink undulating against a blue sky.

We goslings followed our mentors to Carousel Theatre on Granville Island. There, we dug into a generous free feast of pizzas, fruit, desserts and booze, even champagne, dished up by our mentoring mother hens. They clearly wanted to fatten us up for our first race.

We took advantage of our soul enriching get together to bond and cuddle with each other. Yvonne surprised us with thank you cards for our coaches, each decorated with a hand drawn and painted caricature of them. Her graphic talent, which she discovered during chemotherapy treatments, took our breath away.

Not caring whether Don was truly the father of one or all of us, we knighted him as our collective Dad and serenaded him with our composition – “We love you Don.”

We came away feeling satiated, sappy and snug as bugs.

I came away with a deep sense of respect and caring for our captain Dianne. This gosling represented to me everything that we uphold in a courageous breast cancer survivor. Even though she was feeling like hell from chemotherapy earlier in the day, she put in a full paddling practice and moderated the evening’s festivities with her usual warm humour and girlish laughter. Only the deep tiredness in her eyes gave her away. You are a real treasure Dianne. Thank you for being our sister.

Journal entry #14 May 23, 2007

On the eve of real racing

“You’re acting like a bunch of nervous ninnies,” said a bewildered Carol, as she tried to get us focused on our last practice before D-day – the May 26 Women’s Regatta in False Creek. Before taking up our paddles and heading into our 11th hour practice, we had surrounded Carol, like the jittery goslings that we were.

“Where will our life jackets and paddles be? How will we know where to meet? How do we get there? Where can we park? Who will we race against? What time should we be there?” Our questions were endless, and an exasperated Carol had to answer the same questions repeatedly.

Nothing was sinking in because we were sinking into nervous anticipation of our first official dragon boat race. Eventually, we got with it and trooped into our dragon boat for a practice that amazed our coaches, given our scattered state. Our timing was perfect. Our power was perfect. And we paddled our first non stop 500 metre stretch of water. There were exclamations of joy and a sense of victory. We looked at each other incredulously and whispered out of the coaches’ hearing range, “Gees maybe we can do this, even though I haven’t been getting to the gym. It wasn’t that bad.”

We missed our mothering captain, Dianne, that night. She was down with a cold and wanted to rest up for the big day. Katie stepped into Dianne's mothering shoes and calmed us with her angelic smile and soft English voice.

Greedy to get in as many stamina building sessions before the reality of real racing hit us, Jane, Don and Carol kept us paddling nonstop back to the dock. Most of us were ready to chow down and raise up our glasses by the time we sauntered into Sammy J. Peppers.

There, like true goslings at heart, we spilled out bags of tiny neon coloured stick-on foam letters and decorations that Yvonne had brought us to adorn pink foam visors. Regardless of our fate on D-day, we were going to make an indelible impression in the minds of competitors with our fuchsia shirts and outlandishly decorated pink visors complete with matching feathers.

Like five year olds hunched over alphabet soup letters spilled all over our tables, we hunted around for the right letters and decorations to make our individual statements. There were lots of oohs and ahs as we donned our new headgear and preened before our coaches.

Even our coaches got into the act, creating their own personal stamp on their visors. Don looked absolutely gorgeous in his pink visor. Being a long-time West End resident, I gaily told him that he would be a real big hit in the West End. I could take him on a stroll with pride. He looked at me with a mixture of fear, shock and wickedness and said, "Ah thanks, but no thanks." His eyes and laugh really said, "Now stop that, I'm a married man — married to a woman, and I intend to stay that way."

Journal entry #15 May 25/June 2

Our second post Women's Regatta practice on False Creek started out rocky as we paddled all aglow in the radiance of Mother Nature's sunny, warm smile. Concern rippled through our dragon boat. Would we be able to regain the rhythm and oneness of our promising practices before our first regatta?

That question continued to dog us until about half way through our Saturday morning practice. Suddenly, something clicked, we fell into paddle — ours individual strokes moving as one paddle through the waters of False Creek.

Don and Carol were impressed with our ability to regain our paddling composure and cheered us on, which made us paddle even better. Towards the end of our practice we were alternating front and back paddle sections, 10 strokes each in perfect unison, without the beat of Carol's paddle on the dragon boat's bottom to keep us together. Once again, our boat was cutting through water like a knife through butter.

We could taste our readiness for Alcan, the Women's Regatta's hard lessons etched on our hearts. Barb and Wenda set a relentless pace that we cheerfully followed. Lorraine, right behind Wenda was an inspirational follower of our paddling leaders, her stroke never faltering and always keeping pace with Wenda's. We jokingly wondered whether EverReady batteries were powering her. Whatever the source of the power driving her relentless paddle, we wished we could plug into it.

On Saturday night we followed the directions to Rena's place, knowing we had arrived when we saw the Abreast In A Boat fuchsia t-shirt hanging from a tree in her front yard and fluttering in a warm evening breeze. This was the post inaugural competition party we had all been waiting for. Sumptuous appetizers dotted the counter space in Rena's open concept kitchen. An outdoor pool with 80-degree water beckoned us to cool off from the day's paddling practice and balmy temperature.

But we declined the invitation, choosing to huddle around a television in Rena's spacious living room to look at a DVD celebrating the 10th anniversary of Abreast In A Boat's formation. Carol had brought the DVD so that we could watch our beloved leader Don in action on land. Sporting a smashing pink tie, he had taken about 15 minutes to give a minimum five-minute speech at the memorable event. His words of encouragement and explanation of the underlying reason d'être of Abreast In A Boat galvanized our resolve to do our best at the upcoming Alcan dragon boat festival.

Three more practices and our metal would be tested.

Journal entry #16 May 26, 2007

Our first regatta

Remember when we were five and we were all excited because the teacher was taking us some place special? It was so hard to hear what she was saying because all of us were yelling at once, "I want to be first. Do I have to wear that? When are we going? Can I go pee?"

Things aren't much different, years later when you're a gosling in your first Abreast In A Boat regatta. With two of the goslings missing (Bonnie and Vickie), we were up bright and early and huddled under our tent at the Women's Regatta by 8 am. None of us wanted to get a paddling from our coaches who had a trying time settling us down and getting us to the boat, never mind focusing in it.

The sight of Yvonne's colourful and creative caricatures of breast cancer survivors, some of them looking uncannily like us, had us tittering over their appearance on cards and t-shirts obtained by Wendy. Obviously a woman with a soul for marketing, Wendy had arranged to have Yvonne's art printed on the t-shirts unbeknownst to her. Yvonne was so delighted she said to Wendy, "You're hired."

Oblivious to Carol's and Jane's frantic call for the goslings to get in line and trot to the marshalling area we were neck deep in trying on shirts.

The festive feast of costumes — belly-dancing skirts, orange tutus, bras converted into ornate hats — it was spellbinding, distracting and made us thrust out our chests in our fuchsia Abreast In A Boat t-shirts. Regardless of our fate on the water, we were not to be outdone on land.

At one point, our illustrious coaches Don and Carol turned frightfully fuchsia and rolled their eyes at each other. Yvonne, admittedly a troublemaker at 16, had come up with a new eye catching chant. With one hand cupping each breast or phantom breasts alternately,

“We chanted one, two, one, two,” and thrust our hips from side to side. Those of us with one breast cupped and released one breast and chanted, “One, One,one.”

Had we been allowed to do our show-and-tell chant when the organizers asked, “Any team want to demonstrate their theme song?” we could have been a newsmaker for some roving weekend television camera. However, Don’s pleading eyes and repeated whispers, “please no, please no,” encouraged us to restrain ourselves. There went our dreams of turning up on channel 39. I believe that’s the you-know-what channel.

Once in the boat, at the start line, and eventually focused, Jane’s command launched us into our first dragon boat race as breast cancer survivors. The beat of her drum, the urgency of her driving voice encouraging us to dig, dig, dig and the hypnotic rise and fall of our teammates’ paddles kept us in excellent form and in time. What was missing though was power.

Hence we came first in our lane. Mamma always said look at the half full glass not the half empty glass, and when you’re a breast cancer survivor that can be a life saving motto. Dianne, our warm hearted team captain and adopted mamma, handed out blue first place ribbons, which we promptly pinned to our t-shirts.

A triumphant trot through a celebratory arch created by senior Abreast In A Boat members, a half hour rest and a pep talk from Don and we were back in the water for a second match. We were better than first in our lane — although form was not the secret to our victorious second last place finish this time. It was power.

The feeling of actually pulling ahead and beating another boat was intoxicating and disorientating. At one point I saw a boat behind us out of the corner of my eye and thought, “Oh my God, a boat has fallen behind us.”

This improved performance called for a feeding frenzy. Back at our tent we stuffed goodies, brought by the senior paddlers, into our smiling faces and enjoyed the giddiness of our pride. This time, captain Dianne singled out Jane for an award — a bright yellow rubber ducky that she could squeeze if her voice failed in the boat. Somewhere Dianne must have read that the squeaky duck gets the paddlers digging.

Another half hour rest and another pep talk from Don — this time emphasizing the merits of power and form, together — and we headed for our final race.

After our previous performance we had high hopes of whipping the paddles off at least one more team. The truth be known, we thought we could take the Bra Nets, a senior AIAB team out of Barnet. But the darn headgear on those bra-headed paddlers failed to slow them down as expected. It was *déjà vu* — we were first in our own lane again. Back on land, Judy urged us to pay closer attention to her boat maneuvering orders and Don praised us for our passion as paddlers.

Before disbanding for the day, we lingered to chat about the day’s lessons, accomplishments and sights. Don, a man whom many a novice would like to have as a brother or father, if not something more forbidden — who cares that he’s happily married — talked one-on-one with us.

He transformed from coach Don into Doctor Don — a sports physician with great compassion and caring for what is physically and emotionally happening to his gaggle of goslings. Before departing, many of us were recharged for next Wednesday's practice by his encouraging words and wickedly handsome smile.

Okay, Don, Carol, Susan and Judy, now that our gosling feet and paddles have been officially anointed with dragon boat regatta water, we're ready to try harder for Alcan.

Journal entry #17 May 30, 2007

The glorious evening sun glinted off our paddles as we took a slow dragon boat around Granville Island. This was a reflective post-Women's Regatta practice.

Before setting out we had dissected the mayhem that prevailed when Judy, our rock solid steerer, had trouble getting us to follow her dragon boat maneuvering orders during our final race at the Women's Regatta. The conclusion we came to was that we needed to give our full attention to Judy before and after a race, and our race coach needed to reinforce Judy's commands during those periods.

Out on the water it was apparent that many of us were still exhausted from the Women's Regatta, our first full-fledged race. But we cheerfully followed Don's request that we paddle hard for one minute and ease up for the next. A bag of Almond Rocca, a bag of prunes and the smell of pot wafting through the air at one point kept us from succumbing to our exhaustion.

While some indulged in the Almond Rocca, the smell of pot only ignited wishful thinking as it was coming from some luxury liner squeezing past us. The bag of prunes — well nobody wanted to mess with that one, as we all feared overindulgence in that treat would imbue Don's direction, 'let it run' with unwanted meaning.

Before the evening was finished we all had gathered in the women's change room to try on different sizes of the magnificent new Staying Abreast t-shirts designed by Yvonne and peddled by Wendy for only \$25. Any money generated from the sale of the shirts will go towards keeping AIAB a float.

Journal entry #18 June 5th, 2007

And once again, the night's dragonboat practice went smoothly with a progressive improvement in everyone "keeping together" as we paddled off towards Science World, home base for our next exciting challenge, the Alcan. Every time we head off in that direction someone refers back to the Women's regatta — an indelibly embedded fond memory for all of us — and speculates on the future race. It seems like we are all ready and eager to get there. A number of people were missing including Don and Jane. Carol took over at the head of the boat (okay the bow) and gently led us through our paces. As someone said "I never realized how loud Jane's voice was" as we had to really strain to hear Carol. Now we understand why Jane keeps losing her voice. Of course, Carol is fond of telling the story of how quickly we seem to hear and respond to "let it run" and nothing else.

The night was a special night for me as it was a celebration of finishing my last treatment of Herceptin. Much to everyone's delight Dianne was all dressed up and waiting for us along the shoreline waving and flattering us by telling us how great we looked. She came to join us for a drink even though she was clearly having a tough time with her treatment (only one more to go for her). What a trooper.



Barb also went the extra mile and baked a yummy cake that she claimed represented a healthy cell but to the rest of us it looked like it was decorated with a 1001 nipples. Either artistic interpretation was appropriate for this group. I want to thank everyone for their support, hugs, and well wishes. And a special thanks to Wendy for inspiring me to be creative again.

The difference between being with those who have shared this experience and journey and others really came home to me today. At work, when they had a lunch for me, I could see the guys sort of shuffling their feet clearly not that comfortable with the whole concept behind the celebration. With our Staying Abreast group, it feels like being instantly embraced by waves of compassion, caring and understanding. No explanations needed. Thank you.

[#18 written by Yvonne in Carol's

temporary absence)

Journal entry #19 June 9, 2007

As I trotted over to our meeting spot for our second last pre-Alcan practice — today in the rain — I wondered whether being forced to focus in the boat would buoy my mood. It had sunk to an all-time low after finding out that my former partner of 10 years had found a new love and was living with her within four months of their meeting. He and I had split up after my breast cancer diagnosis a year and a half ago. He couldn't handle it.

Lost in thought, I looked up at our meeting spot to see no one there. I thought for a moment, it can't be that Mother Nature's tears for me — or so I wanted to believe — had driven these hardy paddling goslings away. Not a chance — she had just driven them into a warm lounge in the False Creek Recreation Centre. There, they were all huddled together discussing Alcan and future social get-togethers once the main event was over.

As I walked in, many of them looked up with concern in their eyes and said, "Where were you last week? Are you okay?" I was deeply touched and explained that I had another

commitment, made long before last week's practice, and so had to miss the last paddling session and the celebration of Yvonne's last chemo session. I also explained the source of my heavy heart.

That day, paddling in the harsh rain became a heart soothing and cleansing experience for me with my gosling sisters. These women, many of them dealing with their own past and ongoing emotional losses, shared quietly with me some of their stories, showered me with comforting words and held me. I realized that day that, regardless of the outcome at Alcan, we truly paddled as one.

And as if the Dragon Boat gods could hear us, suddenly the disarray in which we had descended into our paddling places in the boat vanished. We began to paddle as one in soul sharing time and in keeping with the beat of Carol's pounding paddle and Don's paddling orders. Inspired by their admiration of our focus in the driving rain — Don was steering that day — we paddled harder than ever. We could feel the rhythm of our strokes lifting our boat out of the water, making it glide through False Creek like a flying carpet. It was just as Carol had predicted if we got the rhythm and the power of our strokes just right.

To our amazement in two practice starts against a formidable boat that left us in the dust before we'd even executed our second paddle stroke at the beginning of the season, we weren't that far behind!! Amazing. Don and Carol looked on in disbelief and locked eyes for a moment. They said, "The goslings are ready for Alcan."

So at the end of our second last practice, we climbed out of our dragon boat drenched and tired from the unrelenting rain, but amazed by our power in becoming one in mind, body and spirit.

Journal entry #20-21 June 16/17, 2007

19th Annual ALCAN Festival – Day one: Slaying the Dragon

Like most babies when they are anxious, I was up at the crack of dawn — 5:30 a.m. to be specific. A gosling by status like 17 other fellow novice paddlers, I was about to earn my paddling wings as a full-fledged Abreast In A Boat paddling breast cancer survivor. First though, we had to lose our gosling feathers at the 19th annual ALCAN dragon boat festival.

I hurried to assemble my dolly full of food and clothing supplies that I would drag on foot to the festival from my West End condo. On the way, I envisioned our Staying Abreast novice team paddling their little gosling hearts out. In less than three hours we'd be digging our paddles deep into the waters of False Creek in the hopes of finishing second or third last. Despite two months of twice a week paddling practices, we knew the festival's other teams, primarily experienced paddlers, would leave us paddling in their wake.

But as Yvonne had first started to sing during our last paddling practice: "Que Sera Sera. Whatever will be will be. The future is not ours to see..." And regardless of the outcome, we had already reaped the rewards of this breast cancer survivor adventure: new friends, renewed physical strength and a revitalized spirit.

Wending my way through the rows of paddlers' tents lining one end of False Creek like an urban refugee camp, I came upon an incredible sight to behold at 7:15 on a wet Saturday morning. There were dozens of women, clad from head to foot in fuchsia coloured attire, leaping into the air in spread eagle fashion. Led by aerobics instructor extraordinaire and Abreast with Fortitude coach Juanita Peglar, these breast cancer survivors were warming up for their first dragon boat race of the day at 8 a.m.

Overcome by the feverish momentum of Juanita's music selection, I dropped my dolly and jumped into the ring of paddlers pounding the pavement in rhythm to Burn Baby Burn. Before I knew it Katie had jumped into the ring with me. In addition to Juanita's dynamic workout, our antics got our fellow novices' blood flowing and onlookers gaping. Dianne's son Eric started snapping pictures that at some future date could serve nicely as currency for encouraging, if not blackmailing, paddlers into buying Abreast In A Boat merchandise.

Concerned that we would get lost in the burgeoning crowd and not make it to our dragon boat on time, coach Carol tethered us to a rope for our 15 minute walk to the marshaling area. Smiles and wisecracks from some army volunteers prompted me to shoot back, "We're not challenged that way..."

Carol soothed our ruffled gosling feathers once we were in the boat and paddling out to our race start position in the constant drizzle. In a velvety reassuring tone, Carol urged us to focus in the boat, watch our timing, dig deep with our paddles and keep a sharp ear out for paddling instructions.

We launched ourselves into a promising start at the sound of Carol's voice, "Go!" But by about the half way mark in our 500 metre race, our lack of power left us in the wake of other paddlers' dragonboats. We were speechless and somewhat crestfallen, feeling that our oneness in timing would compensate for our lack of power.

We had to settle for being first in our lane. However, being outdone by other dragon boats didn't mean that we couldn't slay our dragon. Upon coming into shore, our Staying Abreast gosling team must have had unknown power in reserve. We went down in ALCAN dragonboat history by slamming into the dock, severing unceremoniously the dragon's head adorning the bow of our boat. Judi, our rock solid and fearless steer person who could navigate us through the eye of a needle, was dumbfounded. A miscommunication about how the boat should dock — not a vendetta against dragons — had caused our mishap.

After some refueling and shuteye back at the urban refugee camp, we were keyed up for our second and final 500 metre race of the day. Dr. Don had taken a red-eye flight back from his alma mater, where he had been awarded an honorary doctorate, just to catch us in action. His encouraging words and smile and a raft of roses from Brenda Hochachka's garden put us in a mood to go out and slay us some more dragons — on the water that is. A rich symbol of Abreast In A Boat camaraderie and dragon boat racing, the roses were grown from seeds planted 12 years ago by Brenda, an original AIAB member, when the AIAB first formed.

We proudly wore the roses in our hair, tucked under or beside our trademark fuchsia feathers marking our gosling status. Anything other than a first in our lane finish eluded us

again. Don's sharp eye noted that we had power this time but the timing was out the window, making us look like a millipede undulating back to shore.

Exhausted and energized by the day's events, we headed home to sleep on Don's advice that we marry power with timing and Carol's effusive assurances that we looked great on the water. Tomorrow, we would tackle three more dragons with renewed vigor.

Day two: Paddling our swan song

Mind, body, belly, bum in the boat — That was our mantra going into day two of the ALCAN festival. In her trademark low, steady and reassuring voice, coach Carol reminded us that believing in our mantra was the key to making us powerful and unified in our upcoming races. As in Day one, she took us through a mind and body moving visualization to get us anticipating victory — which would be coming in second last for us — in Day two of our race schedule.

So powerful were the visualizations in Day one, we actually began to lean over the side of our imaginary dragon boat. We thrust our bodies forward in rhythmic unison with our eyes closed as we pictured ourselves paddling to a victorious finish. The second day of racing was marked by four good luck charms. Carol kneeled reverently in front of a ferocious, brown woodenhead of a dragon adorning our Gemini dragon boat, kissing it respectfully in the hopes that this would bring us victory. Our reputation as unwitting dragon slayers had obviously concerned the race organizers, as a much sturdier dragon head had been affixed to our first race boat of day two.

Brenda's husband Gary had brought a slew of yellow roses from their garden for us to adorn our headdresses. Yellow, the colour of loyalty and friendship, was appropriate for our novice group about to graduate from being goslings to full fledged Abreast In A Boat breast cancer survivors and paddlers.

Anita's husband, also named Gary, stood with camera in hand snapping pictures of us as we loaded into our first race boat of the day. Yvonne's husband Frank, the ever faithful and supportive spectator, was hanging over the balcony above the race start site, ready to cheer us on bright and early. These four men were an example of how vital partners and friends can be in rallying the spirits of Abreast In A Boat paddlers.

Don's wife, Barbara, was also on hand to lend support. A rare fixture at dragon boat events, as water sports are not her first love, Barbara smiled warmly and encouragingly as we prepared under the watchful eye of her husband to slay more dragons. Her easy rapport with us veiled any misgivings she had about the joy of dragon boat racing.

Despite Carol's vivid visualizations and Don's urging that a fusion of timing and power were the key to success in racing, we continued to be first in our lane on day two of our races. We were off on our timing and more powerful in our paddling in day two than we were on day one.

At one point we pleaded with Don to get into the boat with us, in the hopes that his gentle but specific direction could guide us to victory. But alas he had to be a legitimate woman

to accompany us. He remarked offhandedly that during another race he had been given a dress. We didn't press for details.

Day two of our races had become so symbolic of the importance of uniting in spirit to weather challenges, we had adopted "Que Sera Sera, whatever will be will be" as our theme song. Kerry Chow, the master of ceremonies for the ALCAN festival was so impressed by this song as a symbol of breast cancer survival that he asked us to sing the song repeatedly.

It was wonderful to see Katie and Rebecca in the limelight leading us in song. They huddled around a microphone, proudly belting out the words to Que Sara Sara. Whatever will be will be for us to echo in unison.

The climax of the ALCAN festival for Abreast In A Boat teams was the Flower ceremony. Following a race amongst 8 teams of breast cancer survivors, the dragon boats rafted together to honour previous members and other women who had succumbed to the disease. Each of the breast cancer survivors in the participating dragon boats waved a pink or red carnation as "The River", a song written by Garth Brooks, played on a public address system.

I will never forget that moment. The words of "The River" were reminiscent of the sentiment behind Que Sera Sera — life should never be taken for granted because all we truly have is the present moment. "Trying to learn from what's behind you. And never knowing what's in store. Makes each day a constant battle. Just to stay between the shores..."

An Abreast In A Boat Deas Diva handed me two carnations, one for me and one for my younger sister Dawn who had died a year and a half before my diagnosis of breast cancer. She was 46, 11 months younger than me. As I clutched Dawn's carnation and mine, I was struck by the tear stained faces staring down at us from the spectators' balcony above. The compassion and sorrow on their faces mirrored the raw emotion on the faces of seasoned breast cancer survivor paddlers who normally kept their sorrow over losing loved ones to breast cancer in check.

When the time came for us to toss our carnations into False Creek I was transfixed by the uncanny appropriateness of my carnation and Dawn's falling in exactly the same spot. In that moment I realized that all breast cancer survivors resided in the same uncertain boat and that the ongoing loss of many lives to the disease is a heartfelt concern for many people.

That night we headed home with a reflective heart having paddled our swan song and divested ourselves of our gosling fuchsia feathers.

Journal entry #22 June 20, 2007

Swan song windup party

Like a flock of geese feasting on delectable breadcrumbs, we newly minted graduate goslings descended on Brenda Hochachka's luscious home near the University of British Columbia. A warm evening capped by soft sunshine enveloped us as we poured into

Brenda's opulent garden, filled with a variety of flowers and a smorgasbord tantalizing appetizers.

The ever-present Abreast In A Boat fuchsia t-shirt that had denoted Brenda's front yard on a dark and rainy early spring night welcomed us with stretched arms embracing the generous evening sunshine.

Dianne, our goddess-like captain, was draped in a long translucent black gown bordered with sequence. She was at once stunning and mournful looking, given the recent loss of our goslinghood.

In contrast to an April evening when we had gathered for our first meeting at Brenda's house, the conversation and the warmth of camaraderie built on the challenge of learning dragon boating enveloped us.

Anne had crafted individualized ornaments to be worn as pendants around our necks. Dianne had made up graduation certificates to recognize everyone's individual talents and contributions. Judi Letawsky, aka "the dragon slayer" was recognized for showing the water god who is boss. Don, our illustrious coach who looks dynamite in pink, was recognized for being a man interested in breasts for all of the right reasons.

We were relieved to see Jane Frost, our passionate drummer at the beginning of the season, in high spirits despite an ongoing battle with pneumonia.

The evening was a joyful and poignant reminder of how challenge — in this case dragon boat racing — can unite breast cancer survivors. The evening was a testimony to how this kind of challenge enables breast cancer survivors to blossom into radiant and giving beings whose very presence is a celebration of life.