

## NOVICE DIARY

2022 SEASON

Laura Ke (Fortitude)

Saturday, April 1, 2022

Tuesday, I had my last appointment with my oncologist and she released me from her care. Today, Saturday, I paddled for the first time with Abreast In A Boat (AIAB) as a Breast Cancer survivor.

We started with a warmup in the parking lot. We were a group of about 30 with all paddlers and crew. We got a quick lesson, paired up and went down to the dock in as orderly a fashion as possible for a crew with 50% Novices, new paddlers. Twenty-one of us all together, abreast in the boat. I think our first practice went well, as well as it could with half a boat of newbies. We stayed afloat!!

Afterward, we did a cooldown and stretch in the parking lot again. Some of the group gathered for the ritual of coffee afterward. Veterans caught up after spending two years apart due to the pandemic restrictions. Us newbies asked advice and recommendations on gear. Lots of new faces, new names and new experiences.

I scan the group at the coffee shop and I am in awe. All these women have been touched by Breast Cancer. All these lives changed, up ended and rearranged to a new and different normal. All these women scared physically and emotionally by Cancer. None of the scars are visible though. All of the women have their own struggles. What really impresses me is their resiliency. In the face of it all, in spite of it all, these women are happy, active, jovial and have come together in joy! How beautiful. What a privilege to sit Abreast In A Boat with these heroes.

Wednesday, April 5, 2022

Second Practice

We all gathered for warm up, another quick lesson and a chat about Regattas. They all want us Novices to go, but I've never paddled before so I have no idea what's involved with a Regatta. They explained the early morning start time with likely four races in the day depending on how we do. Two Regattas that we are signed up for are local, downtown Vancouver, and a third one in the Shuswap. Now that I have more information, I'm in! It sounds like a lot of fun.

On the water we had a stronger practice tonight. At least that's what my body is telling me. It feels like I've had a nice work out. Nothing too crazy that I'll hurt tomorrow but I'll definitely sleep well tonight.

It's so cool to have twenty people in a boat all working in synch, together, I love it. I love being on the water. We're all making fast friends.

Saturday, April 9, 2022

The practices are getting a little more serious as we go. Today we were better synchronized and worked harder. Our usual warm up is about 60% of our capacity. Now our Coach, Brandy, is getting us to 80%. Awesome! It feels good. I could feel it in my back after Wednesday's practice. I think I'm using too much of my back and not enough of my core.

These ladies are great! They are a wealth of information and with little tips and tricks about gloves, foot gear, pants (no underwear or you get 'dragon bites'), different types of padding for the seat, etc, etc. Brandy's a great coach using drills and breaking down the paddling stroke so we all improve.

This year there are 50% Novices on the boat and the veterans have not paddled for two years because of Covid so the extra drills help newbies and veterans alike.

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

It was cold today on the water. We're in a bit of a cold spell right now. We all dress appropriately and we're working hard so once you get out there, we don't notice it at all. It was a good workout tonight. The air seemed heavy though, like when you go running and some days the air seems heavy to move. The boat must have been heavier to move as well. There were only seventeen paddlers out tonight. Apparently three Novice paddlers have withdrawn already. 😞 I'm sad to see them go, especially when we hardly know them yet. Still, we will miss them. Yet, they are survivors too, so they are still a part of us.

Saturday, April 16, 2022

It was a great paddle and workout today. Because of the long Easter weekend, there weren't many teams on the water, so we were able to be out for about 90 minutes.

Coach Brandy has us doing some good, very useful drills. It helps us break down the paddling stroke and be more methodical, conscious and efficient with what we are doing.

A group of us went for coffee afterward. It's good getting to know the others. It's also interesting. Work is seldom talked about. We share about our families; our struggles and we laugh together. It's so easy with these ladies. It's unlike any other group I've been a part of before.

Wednesday, April 20, 2022

Today was our first practice in the rain. It wasn't bad really. It was about 9°C so not too cold, and raining softly. We started and finished in the rain. Neoma took Brandy's place and had her practice agenda written out on paper. By the time we were halfway through practice it was a soggy piece of paper. Ha ha ha. The rain didn't deter us though. No one complained. Again, a good workout with 18 paddlers plus two others in the boat. After a crappy, busy day in the world, it's good to only be concerned about being in time and in sync with the paddle in front of you.

A handful of us remained afterward for a cool down. Some went on to the pub for a hot toddy.

April 23 – Away at a conference, no paddling

Wednesday, April 28, 2022

We're getting better now. We're practicing starts now. They trained on it last Saturday, a practice I was unable to make. It's easy enough to catch up though. The weather is starting to get better. It was 14°C and sunny when I left for practice and we anticipated a great practice with great weather. Ha!! It hailed on us! A few dark clouds can change everything. The hail was short lived though. We pretty much all laughed about it. I joined them at the pub afterward for a drink and some great conversation. I know some of the girls are going through some hard stuff. It's not talked about in large groups, but you can see the held glances, the confirming communicative looks, a special hug or hand squeeze. Breast Cancer isn't over after the treatment is over. It's good to see how they all support each other.

Saturday, April 30

It rained again today. It doesn't seem that cold even though the temperature is only about 9°C. More 'starts' practiced and the length of time we paddle after the start is getting a bit longer. I did not join them for coffee as it's my daughter's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday today and there are lots of fun birthday party preparations to do.

May 4 and May 7 Mexico

Wednesday, May 11

Today I picked up a girlfriend of mine, Kelley, at the airport. She is in visiting from Ontario. She is a very special friend as she has been Riding for the Cure for 10 years now – this year is her 10<sup>th</sup> Ride. I have always admired her for that. She needs to train a lot because she rides 200kms during the fundraiser!

I have not shared the fact that I am a Survivor with a lot of people. I told Kelley that I am paddling, but I did not tell her who I am paddling with. After we got home from the airport, I poured us a glass of wine and shared my story with her. I am so honoured that she has been riding for The Cure all these years. She has ridden for many, and now, she rides for all of us that are Abreast In A Boat.

Again, the weather was chilly tonight. Apparently, this has been the coldest May on record. I believe it. The practice was great though. While I was away in Mexico they built on the 'start', 'build' and 'finish' routine. The length of time that we practice the race has gotten longer too. Now we are practicing starts and racing for 2 to 3-minute intervals and they have asked us to work out during the week to build more stamina. It's 3 weeks till our first race and we need to be ready!

Saturday, May 14

With Coach Brandy's permission, Kelley joined us at practice today. She sat at the back of the boat so that all of us in front of her could focus on getting race ready. Oh, my goodness, what in introduction to Dragon Boat racing and Abreast In A Boat. It was cold and rainy again; really rainy. Poor Kelley. I know she's an athlete, a good sport, and a good paddle boarder, but it was cold and we were all pretty much soaked through by the end of practice. It didn't stop us from going out for coffee and a snack though. It was great to see Kelley with the ladies. There was a lot of mutual respect for what we all do!

I was wondering today, in between race starts, while getting a drink of water and looking forward in the boat at everyone in front of me - what is everyone's individual story? We all work so hard together in the boat and we get to know each other through the season, but each lady has her own detailed, personal story about their journey. I admire all of these women and I wish I had more time to get to know each of them and their stories – and honour their stories in some way. I wonder if anyone has made a compilation of Their Stories. I should dig into that.

Wednesday, May 18

It was so nice to be out on the water tonight and not have to paddle in the rain! We started on our good side, after warming up on the water we did three starts. It went okay. We're getting better. I'm pushing hard, like I would push when I used to run. My field of vision gets a little smaller and black around the edges. It feels good to push

hard though. And I know that pushing like this, and with a team is still easier than pushing through Cancer on my own.

Saturday, May 21

It has occurred to me that there is a certain type of mourning that goes along with Cancer. I'm not sure it ever really goes away. One of the ladies said she'd read a poem and the poem made the analogy of having a loaded shotgun at your back for the rest of your life. It may not necessarily ever go off, but from time to time you get nudged in your back with it just as a reminder that it's still there. I understand that.

Today I found out that two of our girls are having health challenges – the fight goes on.

I'm so glad to be a part of a group that cares and supports each other - part of a group that isn't afraid to talk about the hard stuff. Dealing with the hard stuff and Cancer is what we need to deal with in our lives and having someone to talk to about in a very real way is SO helpful!

Monday, May 23, the May Day Parade in Fort Langley

WOW, what a turn out! This is the 100<sup>th</sup> year of the Parade and everyone has been hiding from Covid for the past two years so it seemed that everyone in Fort Langley plus all their cousins and friends came to line the streets. It was a great opportunity for exposure for Abreast In A Boat and Breast Cancer survivors.

As we paraded, it was interesting to watch the crowd and watch their faces. The children loved the bright pink Dragon, dancing behind the pink sequined wrapped Corvette convertible. It was a lot of fun!

We had quite the wait between our 9:30 line up deadline and the time we were parading. It gave us another opportunity to share stories. One of the ladies that came out has been involved with Abreast In A boat for 35 years! That's amazing. It was so good to hear her stories and stories of Dragon Boat seasons gone by. As time goes on, I see more and more that these ladies are friends for life! Paddlers may come and go, but the fact that Breast Cancer is a part of their life, that is a constant and they are there for each other. They know who is going back for treatment, who needs a ride, and who needs to go for coffee with a friend. It seems Dragon Boat racing and paddling is the reason they get together, and what brings them together initially, but it's the common thread of Breast Cancer in our lives that unites us and binds us forever.

Wednesday, May 25

Before practice, Anne dropped by to bring me a book. I met Anne while we walked the Parade on Monday. The book is compiled by Cheryl Watson and Karen Carlberg. It's 32 stories of women who have collectively survived 695 years after Breast Cancer. Each of us has a story. Each of us has a different experience with Breast Cancer. Telling our stories can help others to know that they are not alone going through this. I am really looking forward to reading it.

Today was our last practice before our 1<sup>st</sup> Regatta. There was a lot of coaching that went on in the boat and on dry land. We needed some fine tuning on the technical parts of paddling but the biggest thing was the mental coaching. Brandy did a great job of mentally preparing us and we talked about it on and off the water. Practice was followed by a meeting in the Training room in Fort Langley. Alison, our Team Manager ordered pizza. With half of our team as Novices, there were a lot of general questions aside from the organising of car pools, snacks and water. The veterans did a lot of calming of newbie nerves and apprehensions.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Regatta, May 28

Up early and out the door for 6:00am, arrive downtown Vancouver by 7:00am and first race at 9:00am. All of us newbies / Novices had the jitters. We lined up, marshalled for the first race. Our load into the boat was different from the way we do it when we practice. It's good to know that we are adaptable.

We paddled out to the starting line, lined up with 3 other boats in our heat and off we went! I was grateful that we practiced for longer than the actual length of the race. We paddled hard and we did well. Race #1 in the books - done. And now we know better what to expect.

Race #2. Wah! That was awesome. We did really well!

Race #3. Good, but #2 was better.

Race #4. This race was with ALL the Abreast In A Boat teams. There were two heats of 4 teams and we rafted up together alongside the dock afterward for our first Flower Ceremony. The number of people in our boats, the number of people gathered and the number of women they knew that were touched by Breast Cancer is overwhelming. One of the original Abreast In A Boat team members spoke. We had a moment of silence and we all dropped our flowers in to the water. It's a pretty emotionally moving ceremony.

Now after my first Regatta and my first Flower Ceremony, I understand what I have heard a few people say "I was given the gift of Cancer". It's a disease that touches many, is often not spoken about because of the amount of hurt and grief the word implies. Being a part of Abreast In A Boat is a privilege. We paddle and train quietly together, and we are making a very public statement of survivorship, health, love and

friendship. I'm proud to wear my team shirts. I'm proud to represent Breast Cancer survivors at events like parades and regattas. The public need to know that having Cancer is not necessarily a death sentence.



All the boats lined up



The tent area being set up



Debriefing after our first race



Our first flower ceremony



Wednesday, June

Tonight's practice was a regroup and a practice. One week between Regattas.

June 4, 2022 Vessi Regatta

We got a bronze medal!!

The competition was definitely steeper because it was an open competition, not just an Abreast In A Boat event. The weather was a bit rainy at the start but our day ended with warmer, partly sunny weather.

Our races were really close together today. At one point, we had a quick 10-minute turnaround. We just got off the deck, had a *really* quick debrief and marshalled up again for the next race.

Neoma, our team Captain, does the chant while we are marshalled up..." We're motivated, we're dedicated. Everywhere we go, people want to know, who we are, where we come from. We are Fortitude, mighty, mighty Fortitude. We are Fortitude, surviving and thriving" It's great! It kind of sets us apart. I like that. Not many teams do that sort of thing. I've only heard two other team do it. It's pretty cool. It builds up spirit, excitement and in some odd way, it fuses us together before we climb into the boat. I love it!

I had some physical challenges after the races today. I got really lightheaded and unstable. I think it's because I sometimes have an issue with low blood pressure. I'll have to get that checked out, but when I asked for help, the girls were all there for me. They were concerned about what I had eaten or drank and what I had NOT eaten or drank. Aside from getting a Dr. to check it out, the nurses on the team all tell me I need to drink more water. Agreed. Going forward, will do.

We went for lunch after the Regatta again today. It's so nice to sit beside someone different every time. It's great to hear other people's stories and to get to know them. We all wore our medals to lunch. And I love my medal so much. It's so beautiful that I wore it to the corporate barbeque later in the afternoon. I thought, what better way to promote Abreast In A Boat and to get the word out. It was fun!





Wednesday, June 8, 2022

It was a great practice tonight. We worked on stamina. By the time we docked, we had paddled about 50 minutes. After Vessi, our last Regatta, Brandy realized we have a bit of an issue with stamina. For a boat with half of us being Novices, that makes sense. We'll get there though.

Saturday, June 11, 2022

Practice was cancelled because of Freshet, the spring run-off. It causes the River to be quite high and very fast. It could be very dangerous. We'd rather be cautious.

Today was also the Cancer Relay for Life event. Most of us were able to be there. We walked the 'Victory' lap together, the first lap of the Relay. We all walked as Cancer survivors.

What a great speaker they had. She was amazing. She had stage 2 Pancreatic Cancer at 43 and she has been Cancer free for 20 years. She's been an integral member of the Canadian Cancer Society and the Relay event for years. It was inspiring to hear her.

Afterwards, many of us purchased Luminaries to decorate. Luminaries that will be lit after dark tonight. We decorated them and wrote names of people we each knew that had passed, or still struggle with, or are survivors of Cancer.

Boy, having cancer has opened a whole new world for me. One I suppose I denied for a number of years, even though it hurt so much to see it consume my father. It hurts, that's for sure. My denial is not out of malice. Many of us shy away from the big C word. No wonder, it is a monster! It sure leaves some amazing people in it's wake though. People are changed if they have 'walked' with a family member or friend that fights the disease, or has a loved one die because of Cancer. It changes us. Somehow, it seems it makes us more human. We are connected in another way - in a way that others who have not dealt with it will not understand. And we do not take life for granted. The world looks different after Cancer.

Wednesday, June 15, 2022

Not able to practice again because the river is too high and too fast. Instead, we all had a good laugh practicing throwing the 'throw bag' which may be a very helpful skill if ever needed. Most of us were thankful not to have to paddle because it's rainy and cold again, 14°C. You'd never know it's June from the weather. We all went for a drink and a bite to eat afterwards. There was a lot of talk about the upcoming Salmon Arm trip. The event was to be a Regatta, but they did not have enough entries. They are finding that attendance is down at most Regattas. That's just another Covid issue, I guess. Some teams have disbanded completely. Some paddlers just have not returned. 😞

Saturday, June 18, 2022

On Friday we all travelled to Salmon Arm in different groups and cars meeting for lunch on the other side of Kamloops at a Winery that Allison had arranged. What a treat!! Afterward, we travelled on to Salmon Arm to check in to the hotel and get settled in. We all met at 5:30pm in Alison's room to sing and record the song 'Fortitude' set to 'I am sixteen' from The Sound of Music. The words to the song were written by a member of AIAB who is not doing well with her fight against Cancer. She was an integral part of Fortitude in past years. Clearly, she is well loved. The caring and community of this group amazes me.

Alison also made a reservation for all of us at a local restaurant. A group of 22 in all. It was great to share a table with ALL of us there. Afterward everyone gathered in a hotel room to party. Oh my gosh, what fun!! Singing, dancing, laughing, visiting and carrying on. It's good to be away and let our hair down!

Saturday morning, we were all prepared for rain on the water during the Regatta but weather held out and it turned out to be a great day. Due to the smaller turnout, the event was to be more of a Public Relations event as there were only three teams. It turned out to be more of a Regatta than we thought. We all paddled out together and were to 'race in' ceremoniously, but I think paddlers have a hard time with not racing.

We all paddled in together, but we pushed each other too. Once a racer, always a racer. It was fun.

While we were away from the dock, we rafted up for the Flower Ceremony. It was VERY touching, as they always are, but each ceremony is a bit different. With this one, being away from the dock; nestled in the mountains; rafted together; surrounded by the peace of the lake - it was beautiful! After the ceremony was over, it was special to paddle through all the floating pink carnations. Cancer impacts SO many people. It just boggles my mind when I think of the numbers.



Flower Ceremony in Salmon Arm

Organizers of the Regatta arranged box lunches for everyone. Yum, it was very good! After lunch, we had the use of the boats and we were able to have a good practice on the Lake. It was good to experience it. The water is different on the lake and the paddling is different. The winds, and currents all change often and you need to adjust your paddling. It was a great opportunity to practice on the lake and the hosting team, the Pink Pistons, did a great job. We all felt very welcome.



Padding on the Lake.

We got off the water and we had some time to ourselves. Some went shopping; some went hiking; while others went to a winery. We gathered together again late afternoon before another meal shared together in a restaurant, again, arranged by our Team manager, Alison. These girls are so funny!! Many good laughs all around. Again, we gathered in one of the hotel rooms. Someone was voted to be the D.J. We all requested some of our favourite songs. We danced, sang, munched on snacks, and had a few 'pops' - more fun memories were made together.

Sunday morning, we all checked out at different times and made our way home in separate cars and groups.

June 25, 2022

### The Year End Party

So, assuming you were all Novices at one time, you will know that the Novices are required to do a skit. Apparently having half a boat of Novices is an unusually high percentage. Again, the result of a lot of Covid attrition and our team was one of them. All that translates to a pretty big skit come the Year End Party. And what a skit it was. There were 10 of us decked out in pink boas with our paddles, all singing and dancing to the tune of "Mambo #5" by Lou Bega. The names were all replaced with non-Novice



team names. It was SOOOO funny! We had so much fun! I will never hear “Mambo #5” the same way again.

What a great evening! Our Coach, Brandy Pieters, and our Captain, Neoma Ham, handed out special gifts to each of us. It was a very heart warming and memorable event!

August 14, 2022

It's mid-August now. I will admit to being reluctant to call this diary finished and submit it because it would be official then, the season would be over. I do not want the season to officially end and this whole wonderful group dissolve. We have met for kayaking on random days, mostly organized by senior members of our team. We still connect and chat on our TeamSnap. Some have gotten together for outdoor concerts and other events. And some volunteer to take other team members for Cancer treatment.



I now realize that my fear of the group dissolving is unfounded. This group is a tight group, a family. We are knit together from the yarn of Cancer and we all have FORTITUDE!!!!

We continue to practice once per week now. We are all looking forward to the Fall Classic, the last Regatta of the season.

September 23, 2022

The Fall Classic, our last Regatta. This is a 200 M race. A real sprint! Wow, you really need to leave everything on the water to sprint a dragon boat. I guess we did that. We got another medal, a bronze medal. A team with half a boat of newbies, or Novices and we placed at every Regatta we entered. That's awesome, but the season is over - officially. I sobbed and cried to myself as we paddled back to the dock. I will never have another Novice year again. It has been an amazing year, an amazing experience and an amazing teaching.

Today it is one year and two days since my first surgery to remove what was a benign lump. The edges of what was removed turned out to be the issue. Small bits of DCIS discovered by accident. The best possible scenario they said. In that one year and two days my life has changed a lot. Changed for the better - especially because it means I now call these ladies MY TEAM!

Laura Ke