



Dr. Don McKenzie

1996

In the beginning ...

It was a typical April day in Vancouver, broken cloud, cool with the possibility of either sunshine or showers. It was hardly normal, however, when 24 women aged 31-62, appeared at False Creek for their first session in a dragon boat. Then, and now, the only criteria required to join this group was a history of breast cancer. A preliminary meeting three months before had laid out a training program in the gym and reviewed a plan to paddle in the Vancouver Festival in June of 1996. Arm circumferences measured, words of advice given and into the boat -- the adventure had begun!

These were very special women. Breast cancer-related lymphedema was a huge issue at that time and they were challenging the myth that exercise would trigger this condition. I really did not think they appreciated the magnitude of the task ahead. No one was a paddler, but this did not seem to be an issue. I later understood that once you have had breast cancer, other challenges pale in comparison.

As we progressed on the water, their confidence was both terrifying and rewarding; they trusted this program and had confidence that lymphedema would not develop. Not so with several of my colleagues who had expressed some concerns and had reservations about this project; others were more critical and questioned my judgement. We were all taking a risk, the women much more than me. Standing with these women before practice, being in the boat or beside them in my kayak, it just seemed right. This was the correct thing to do; basic physiological principles and their confidence in this project would carry the day.

From the first day we met, to the festival in June, not one woman ever questioned the challenge that we were undertaking. If you ever wanted to define a team with a common purpose, look to this group of 24 women. We all understood that if they could visibly demonstrate that repetitive, intense, upper body exercise in breast cancer survivors would not cause lymphedema, this would change the lives of thousands of women.

No lymphedema, lots of fun, a story to tell. Thanks for participating in this project! But they would not go away ... AND THE REST IS HISTORY!

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