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'There Is a Life After Breast Cancer'

Guelph dragon boat team set to compete in 10th annual Vancouver regatta for cancer survivors

BY ANDREW VOWLES

It's a date stuck forever in Beverlie Nelson's mind. "I'll never forget it: April 12, 2001 — the morning my father died," says the 1964 U of G graduate. "I called it stress, but that's not what the doctor called it."

"It" turned out to be breast cancer.

A year later, Nelson had undergone what she calls the "Cadillac" treatment of surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. And she had taken another important step: she had joined Breaststrokes, the dragon boat team of breast cancer survivors based at her alma mater.

The team, many of whose 45 members have U of G connections, is now refining for the 10th annual dragon boat regatta for breast cancer survivors, to be held next month in Vancouver. Breaststrokes will be among more than 60 teams from a handful of other countries competing in the event, to take place June 25 to 27

They'll be there to compete. But as several team members stress, winning a podium comes a distant second to other goals, from fun to fitness to emotional support with breast cancer and its aftermath.

Take Breaststrokes member Myrna Dyson, third oldest among the paddlers ranging from 35 to 80. The 75-year-old laughs as she remembers her first outing on the water years ago. Hampered then by an ailing knee, she needed help to get in and out of the boat. But nobody else looked askance. "It's a supportive group, it's a family," she says.

Dyson had been diagnosed with breast cancer in 1992. She learned the news



One of the oldest members of the Breaststrokes team Myrna Dyson is a regular in the Athletics Centre working to become assistant trainer for the team. PHILIP SCHWALBE

week after she'd retired following more than a quarter-century at a company. i became a volunteer with the Canadian Cancer Society 11 years ago. Cancer h the lives of her first husband, her son and a close friend.

Four years ago, she joined Breaststrokes after a member suggested paddling ease lingering physical discomfort from her surgery and treatment. Dyson has canoeist, wilderness hiker and scuba diver. "I've been a rockhound for years,"

That interest also brings her to campus as a geology student. Last fall, hoping identify rocks and understand their distribution, she audited an introductory c taking a second course in the winter, Dyson has developed wider interests in c sciences. "We'll see what I will do next fall."

This spring, she began working with Breaststrokes coach Pat Richards, co-ordi lifestyle and fitness programs in the Department of Athletics, to become an as trainer. Dyson now helps lead team members during twice-weekly workouts a Centre. Training occurs year-round and includes aquatics, cardiovascular and training, and dry-land paddling.

"Myrna's got a watchful eye over us all," says Nelson, who three years ago rec orientation around the Athletics Centre from Dyson. Apart from attending alur Nelson hadn't returned often to campus. (Her husband, Gary, studied agricultu She now helps run their farm in Ariss, having retired from a teaching career.)

In 2003, Nelson was one of four Breaststrokes members on a national team th in New Zealand. Despite encountering four-foot swells that at times left memk in the air, she says the trip was "an incredible experience. I'm so glad the resl is going to be able to experience that, the positiveness of it, the strength of th involved, the encouragement we got from each other."

Members of the Guelph and Wellington Breast Cancer Support Group assembl dragon boat squad in 1998 after visiting a team in Hamilton. Based at U of G, enters about five races each year. As a practice run for Vancouver, Breaststro compete in the Guelph Lake Dragon Boat Festival June 3 to 5, which is expect more than 70 corporate and community teams.

The Breaststrokes team's wooden 45-footer, painted in U of G colours, weighs pounds and seats 22 crew members, including a steersperson and a drummer who keeps the paddlers in synch. To accommodate all the members while in V they'll join forces with an Ottawa team to fill a second shared boat.

The Vancouver regatta was launched 10 years ago by Don McKenzie, a U of G education graduate who is now a physician and professor at the University of Columbia. McKenzie has long advocated the use of exercise to help breast can combat the swelling and constricted movement often caused by loss of lymph following treatment.

A study published last month in the Journal of the American Medical Associati regular physical activity reduces the chance of recurrence of breast cancer.

That idea makes sense to Breaststrokes member Sylvia Willms, head of the cc services division of U of G's Hospitality Services. She joined the dragon boat t after undergoing treatment for breast cancer discovered in early 2000. Since 1 also taken part in the annual Run for the Cure in Kitchener and completed a 6 walk for a breast cancer fundraiser in Toronto.

"Pat Richards has always said to us: 'Keep your fat intake low, and exercise is for your body,'" says Willms, who received the doctor's five-year "all-clear" th been living that for the last three years."

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in Canadian women, with o women expected to develop the disease in their lifetime. In 2005, an estimate women will be diagnosed in Canada with breast cancer, and 5,300 will die fro

Apart from the physical benefits, Willms and other Breaststrokes members say social and emotional gains from their shared pastime. Willms, who has become friends with several other team members, says: "Hopefully, you can find some being diagnosed with breast cancer. For me, it was finding this team."

Boosting self-esteem among breast cancer survivors is critical, says Richards, Breaststrokes volunteers. "I think cancer affects everybody, and I always find we can't figure it out."

She'll accompany the team to Vancouver to cheer from the shore. The Breasts takes 3½ to four minutes to cover the standard 500-metre course — not a bad although hardly world-beating.

"Winning is not as important," says Willms. "We want to be in the race, but win everything for us. It's about supporting each other and having fun."

Adds Nelson: "We'll do as well as we can. I think the fact that we're there is a There is a life after breast cancer."

There are about 50 breast cancer survivor dragon boat teams across Canada, national team. The Breaststrokes team is sponsored by the Athletics Department Bank of Nova Scotia.

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